

THE HONEY-POT

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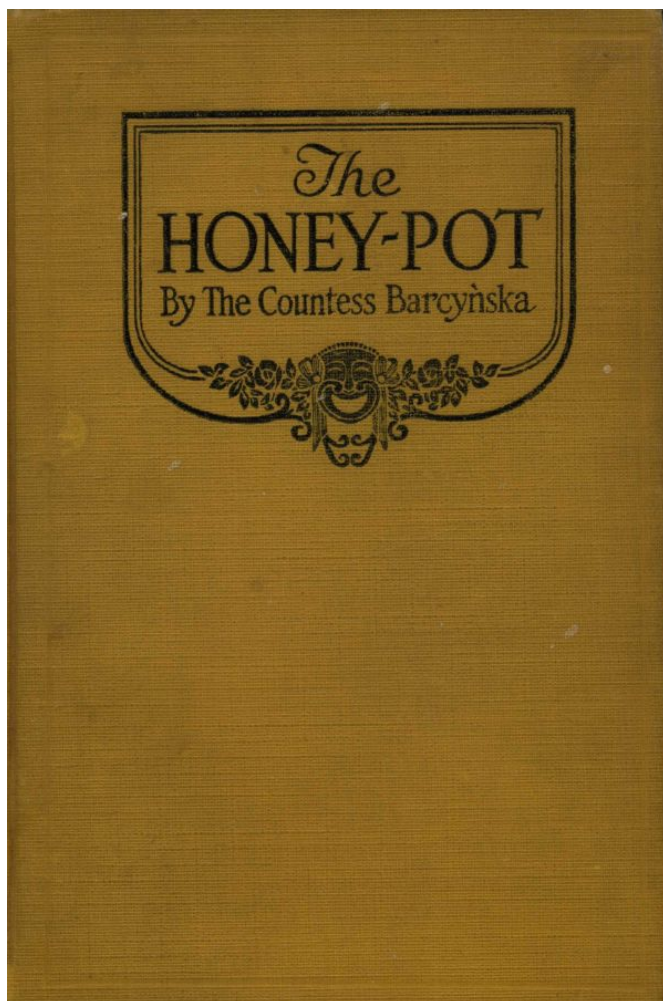
*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HONEY-POT ***

Produced by Al Haines.

THE HONEY-POT

BY
THE COUNTESS BARCYŃSKA

Author of "The Little Mother Who
Sits at Home."



Cover



SHE PUT ALEXANDRIA INTO THE MOST COMFORTABLE OF HER CHAIRS AND
DREW ANOTHER CLOSE TO IT

[PAGE 103.]

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I am a traveler in the great World-path; my garments are dirty and my feet are bleeding with thorns. Where should I achieve flower-beauty, the unsullied loveliness of a moment's life? The gift that I proudly bring you is the heart of a woman. Here have all pains and joys gathered, the hopes and fears and shames of a daughter of the dust; here love springs up struggling toward immortal life. Herein lies an imperfection which yet is noble and grand. If the flower service is finished, my master, accept this as your servant for the days to come.

—Rabindranath Tagore.

THE HONEY-POT

I

In her petticoat, barefooted, because the morning was sultry, Miss Maggy De-lamere plied a well-worn hare's foot to her cheeks with the sure touch of an artist. Professionally speaking and adding a final "e" to the term, that is what

she was—chorus-lady by courtesy, showgirl in the vernacular of the stage. On her small dressing-table were ranged a number of pots and bottles, unguents and creams. A battered make-up box containing remnants and ends of variously colored grease sticks flanked a looking-glass of inadequate size and small reflective power. A beam of sunlight striking across a corner of the table danced with minute particles of dust from a powder-puff.

The astonishing amount of vigor she put into the process of facial adornment, the prodigality with which she used pigments and washes, were characteristic of her temperament, all generosity and recklessness. Paint and powder were a habit with her, not an exigency. No girl of nineteen could have needed them less. Her complexion, well-nigh flawless, bloomed beneath the unnecessary veneer. Not even a cracked mirror could mitigate her good looks nor detract anything from her vivacious expression. It reflected a speaking face even when the lips were still.

She was taking unusual pains with her appearance this morning. A card stuck in the edge of the looking-glass provided the reason.

Memo. from A. Stannard, Dramatic Agent.

PALL MALL THEATRE.

Voice Trial, June 22nd, 10.45 a. m.

As everybody knows, the Pall Mall is the one London Theater of all others to which ladies of the chorus most aspire. In Maggy's case that aspiration was intensified by real want of an engagement. She had recently succumbed to an attack of that childish complaint, measles, and was more than usually hard-up. Her choice of garments was as limited as her means, yet twice she changed her mind about one or another of them before she was satisfied that she looked her best. Her efforts to that end finished with the tacking of several sheets of tissue paper to the inside of her skirt to give it the rustle of a silk lining. The rustle—deceptive and effective as stage thunder—convincingly accomplished, she felt ready to present herself before any stage-manager in existence.

If her mood was serene vanity had no part in it. Unlike the average chorus-girl she was quite free from conceit of any kind. She was too good-looking to be unaware of it, but she did not trade on her appearance further than professional principles strictly allowed. She asked no more of it than that it should bring her in from thirty shillings to two pounds a week for honest work behind the footlights. Commercialism with her ended there. She was all heart, but free from illusions. Her mother had been on the stage before her. Always on the stage herself since

childhood, familiarized with its careless, hand-to-mouth existence, its trials and its exuberances, she had become worldly-wise at ten and a woman at fifteen. But the life did not demoralize her. The bad example of a mother's frailty and intemperance had been her safeguard. She had never lost her head or her heart. She did not rate herself very high, but she rated men lower. Apart from this she had no hidebound views about life or morality. Since her mother's unlovely death she had lived alone and kept her end up somehow. She had often been penniless, gone hungry and cold; but so did many of the people among whom she moved. So long as she was not quite penniless she never worried. Cigale-like she lived in the present. If she ever suffered from fits of depression it was when she realized that she was more than usually shabby and needy, a condition, however, which she preferred to put up with rather than descend to the acquisitive methods of other girls.

Through the rattle of the traffic in the street below she heard a church clock booming. Incidentally, she regarded churches less as places of worship than timepieces of magnitude, convenient when you do not possess a watch. She counted the strokes, ten of them, darted to the glass for a last survey of herself, gave a touch to her hat, another to her waistbelt, and pattered in her now stockinged feet to the top of the stairs.

"Shoes, please, Mrs. Bell!" she sang out. "You don't want me to be late, do you?"

"Coming this moment, Miss Delamere!" shouted an answering voice.

Mrs. Bell lumbered up the stairs with the shoes in her hand—high-heeled ones of the sort that only last a fortnight before losing shape.

"I just stopped to give them an extra polish," she panted.

Maggy took them from her and hurriedly put them on. While she buttoned them her landlady went on her knees and gave them a final rub up with her apron. She meant well.

"You'll have luck to-day," she said, regaining her feet and surveying her lodger with approval. "I should look out for the butcher's black cat on my way, if I was you. Back to dinner, dear?"

"I'll have a cut off whatever you've got, if I am," Maggy answered.

"Mine's hot Canterbury lamb and onion sauce."

"All right."

Maggy ran downstairs, slammed the hall door behind her and walked down the street into the main thoroughfare, looking for the green motor-bus that would take her within a stone's throw of the Pall Mall Theater. In a quarter of an hour she had reached that imposing edifice. Going in at the stage door she descended a flight of stone steps, traversed a long passage, and found herself upon the stage.

Gray daylight filtered down from the skylight above the flies, just enough

for the business of the moment, no more. Across the unlit footlights was a gloomy void, pierced by an occasional gleam from an open door at the back of the pit or dress-circle, and relieved by the lighter hue of serried rows of dust-sheets hanging over the seats and balcony edges.

Close to the footlights was a table occupied by the stage-manager and one of his satellites. In the corner to their left an upright piano was set askew with the conductor of the orchestra seated at it. At the back of the stage, standing about in groups, some thirty girls and a few men were waiting to have their voices tried.

They chattered noisily. Most of them seemed to know one another. One or two called out a greeting to Maggy. Some were volubly discussing their professional experiences, telling of late engagements and prospective ones; the run of this piece, the closing down of that; incidents on tour and in pantomime; suppers at restaurants and the demerits of landladies. These topics ran into one another and overlapped. Others, with giggles, imparted risky anecdotes in undertones. Most of them appeared to be taking the situation with the calmness of habit. Nervousness showed in a few faces; anxiety in one or two. One pale-faced girl was in a condition of approaching maternity. In other surroundings she would have attracted attention, perhaps called up pathetic surprise that in the circumstances she should be attempting to obtain employment. But here very few were affected by pathos at sight of her, nor was she an object of much surprise.

After Maggy had exchanged a word or two with those whom she knew she took very little notice of the people about her. She stood apart, humming a tune, and every now and again her feet broke into a subdued dance step. But this state of abstraction did not last long. That she was a creature of impulse showed in an abrupt change from it to close attention of what was going on around her. Her fine eyes went alertly over those present and came to rest on a girl of about her own age whose quiet manner and dress of severe black singled her out from the rest. She was tall and slight, very much in the style of the women in Shepperson's drawings. Her small features and graceful figure gave her a distinguished appearance. She looked what she was, a lady, and a stranger to her surroundings. She held a roll of music and glanced nervously about her until she became aware of Maggy's smiling regard. It seemed to encourage her. She returned the smile and advanced.

"At which end will they begin?" she asked nervously, making it clear that she was an amateur.

"Anywhere," replied Maggy with friendly cheerfulness. "You're not a pro.?"

"No."

"I thought not. I shouldn't let on if I were you. Managers fight shy of beginners. First thing they'll ask you at the table is what experience you've had. Haven't you been on the stage at all before?"

"No, I've never appeared in public. I'm new to it all."

"Been looking for a shop—an engagement—long?"

"For five weeks. Ever since I came to London."

The girl in black could not hide the note of disappointment that came into her voice. Maggy gave her an encouraging tap on the arm.

"Five weeks!" she scoffed. "That's nothing. Lots of us are out for months. You'll know that if you ever hit real bad luck."

"I can't wait months."

"Hard up?" Maggy asked with quick understanding.

"I shall be soon."

"Same here. Tell me, where are you living? You're different to the crowd. I like you."

The girl in black hesitated and got a little red.

"I'm not living anywhere at present," she confessed. "I was in a boarding-house until to-day. I had to leave. I shall have to find rooms before night. Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me where to look?"

They had moved away from those nearest them. Each felt attracted to the other without knowing why.

"Did they keep your box?"

"No. Why should they?"

"I thought you meant you couldn't pay."

"No, it wasn't that. But I can't go back. A man came into my room last night—one of the men staying there. I rang the bell and called the landlady. I don't understand why, but she blamed me and was very offensive. I didn't go to bed again. I sat up, waiting for the morning."

"The beast!"

The cheery look left Maggy's face, giving place to one of deep resentment. "The man, I mean," she said, "though I've no doubt the woman was just as bad. There are houses like that. Fancy you not knowing it. I should have ... Here, they're going to begin. Keep by me. I'll see you through."

The stage-manager rapped on the table.

"Silence, please! We'll commence now."

An immediate hush followed. The groups broke up, spreading across the stage, facing the footlights. Such indifference to the occasion as many of them had hitherto evinced was gone now. They were there to be engaged. Even the most self-assured became serious, made so by the competitive equation. Only twelve girls and three men were wanted to complete the ranks of the chorus, and here were nearly forty applicants for the vacancies.

"Come on, come on. Who's first? You with the boa," proceeded the stage-manager. "What's your song?"

The girl indicated handed her music to the pianist. He rattled off the prelude without the waste of a moment. The girl sang a few bars, and was interrupted by: "That'll do. Next!"

Nothing more was said or asked. The girl took her sheet of music, and effaced herself. With equal celerity the next dozen were disposed of. Not more than one out of four was called to the table for her or his name to be recorded. All the while the singing was going on the stage-manager kept up a running fire of remarks at the expense of the singer. Generally they were merely sarcastic; some were rude.

The girl in black kept close to Maggy who looked on unperturbed, now and then jerking out a subdued comment on the proceedings, partly to herself, partly for the information of her companion.

"Now it's Dickson, poor kid! Look at the state she's in. Silly of her to come. Powell won't let her open her mouth.... There you are! Off she goes. She's crying. The brute! He needn't have *said* it! ... That's Mortimer. She'll get taken on.... Knew it at once. Down goes her name—address 'Makehaste Mansions!' Don't they get through us quick? We're not human beings, only voices and figures. My turn!"

She walked confidently down to the table, ignoring the piano.

"Where's your song?" inquired the stage-manager.

"Won't you take my voice on trust, Mr. Powell?" was her jaunty reply. "It's like a bird's."

"Nightingale, I suppose?" he jeered.

"No, bird of Paradise. Aren't I good enough to look at?"

After a momentary hesitation, during which he appraised her face and figure, he said:

"Got a photo of yourself in fleshings?"

"Not here. Plenty at my agent's—Stannard's."

"All right. Name, please. Next."

The girl in black was next. Her heart beat uncomfortably fast as she moved down. Had she to pitch her voice to fill that gaping void across the footlights? She shrank from singing to these blasé-looking men who gave the impression of damning before they heard. Then she saw that Maggy was still standing by the table and nodding encouragingly to her. It gave her heart. She handed her song to the pianist and commenced to sing.

"Louder, please," said some one.

She sang louder and lost her nervousness. It was not so difficult to fill that huge auditorium, after all. So far, she was the only one of them that had been allowed to sing her song half through.

"Shouldn't mind hearing the rest of that another day," said the stage-

manager, stopping her at last. "Not half bad, my dear. Name, please."

She gave her name, Alexandra Hersey.

"What have you been in?" came the query.

Before she could answer Maggy chimed in.

"She was with me on tour in 'The Camera Girl' No. 2 Company."

"Address?"

Again Maggy came to the rescue.

"Put her down to mine. 109 Sidey Street. Then you'll remember us both—p'r'aps!"

She hooked her arm in Alexandra's and made for the wings. When they were in the passage facing the stage-door she said:

"I'll help you find rooms if you like. I've nothing to do. I say, you can sing!"

"If it hadn't been for you—"

"Oh, rats!"

"But it was awfully good of you," Alexandra maintained. "Is there a room in the house where you live?" she asked, actuated by a strong desire not to lose sight of her new acquaintance.

"There's room in my room, that's all. I pay ten shillings a week. My landlady charges fifteen for two in it. That would be seven-and-six each. But"—she made a wry face—"you wouldn't like it. It's slummy. There's a smell of fried fish and a beastly row half the night. Still, you can have a look at it if you like."

There was invitation in the tone.

"I'd like to come," said Alexandra.

"Right-O. Here's my motor car. The green one." She held up her hand to a 'bus driver. "My chauffeur doesn't like stopping, except for policemen."

She gave Alexandra a push up and sprang on the footboard after her. They climbed to the top, and were rattled and jerked in the direction of the King's Cross Road.

II

One Hundred and Nine Sidey Street was not an attractive apartment house, but it was cheap and respectable. Mrs. Bell, an "old pro" herself, by reason of having, in some distant past, earned twelve shillings a week as a "local girl" in pantomime, preferred the lesser lights of the stage for tenants. She knew their ways, their

freedom from "side," their unexacting habits. When she could not secure them she took in "respectable young men." At the present juncture the young men predominated. Maggy Delamere was the sole representative of "the professional" in her house. She occupied the third-floor front, and owed three weeks' rent.

She threw open the door for Alexandra to enter. It was the sort of room that many a domestic servant would have considered inadequate. The only compensating feature about it on this hot June day was that it had two windows. Both stood open, and on the sill of each a pot of flowers, mignonette in the one, sweet peas in the other, helped to create an impression of freshness. This was strengthened by the paucity of its furniture and the chilly look which an unrelieved expanse of linoleum invariably gives. A single iron bedstead occupied one angle. A clean but faded nightdress case, trimmed with crochet work, lay on the pillow. This and the flowers in the windows were the only things that gave evidence of the room being occupied by a young girl.

Maggy made a comprehensive gesture with her hand.

"The chorus lady at home!" she declaimed humorously. "Living in the lap of luxury. There's her voluptuous couch, her Louis the what's-his-name chest of drawers, her exquisite bric-à-bric washstand and—My dear, be careful of the chair! It's a real antique, only three legs and a swinger! Sit on the bed, it's safer. Pretty little place, isn't it? We'll have lunch in a minute or two. Can you eat hot New Zealand mutton? I told the old woman I'd have a cut off her joint to-day. I'll just shout down to let her know there's two of us."

After her voice had echoed down the three flights and been duly answered, she came back and poured out water for her new friend to wash her hands in. Common yellow soap was all she could offer for this purpose. She was only able to afford the fancy variety and cheap perfumes when she was in an engagement. She took off her hat while Alexandra dried her hands and then, as they sat side by side on the bed, she suddenly blurted out:

"What the dickens makes you want to go in for the stage? Don't tell me if you'd rather not."

"There's no reason why I shouldn't," said Alexandra. "I've longed to ever since I was quite small."

"Goodness! And I've wanted to get off it ever since I can remember. Not that I ever had the chance. I don't know how to do anything useful. I suppose you got cracked about the stage, same as most girls, because you didn't know anything about it. You belong to a swell family, I suppose?"

"No," was the smiling reply; "only Anglo-Indians."

"What are they? Half-castes? You're fooling!"

"English people who live or have lived in India. My father was in the army."

"What, an officer?"

"Yes."

Maggy was impressed. She had once met a Sergeant-Major, and, superior being as she thought him, knew that his glory was reflected from the commissioned ranks.

"That's something to be proud of, anyway."

Alexandra's people had been in the Army and Civil Service for generations. It had not occurred to her to think of them unduly on this account. She said as much.

"Well," observed Maggy sententiously, "I should say your father and the rest of your relations must be either dead or dreaming to let you go on the stage."

"Nearly all my near relations *are* dead. I have an aunt and uncle—"

"What does he do?"

"He's a retired colonel. He—they wanted me to live with them." Alexandra gave the information with a touch of reluctance.

"Why didn't you?"

To give a stranger adequate and convincing reasons why one prefers not to live with uncongenial relations is not always easy. Alexandra put it briefly.

"We have nothing in common," she said.

"And what do you think you have in common with this life and the people you'll meet in it?" propounded Maggy. "If I were you I'd go back and say: 'Nunky old dear, I've changed my mind. I'll come and live with you and be your loving niece, amen.' Fancy! a retired colonel—Anglo-Indian—and you think twice about it!"

"Nothing would induce me to change my mind," said Alexandra with decision. "There are three girls, and they find it a tight fit without me. They're not rich.... When my mother died I had to do something. Besides, I'm really ambitious to get on."

Maggy snapped her fingers.

"Oh, ambition! Do you know what the ambition of every chorus girl is? It isn't to become a star-actress. That's clean beyond her. It's to find a man who'll take her away from a room like this and treat her decently."

Alexandra found it difficult to reconcile such a statement with one so beaming and joyous-looking as Maggy.

"But you—you don't think like that?" she rejoined.

"Sometimes I do. I've kept straight so far because I like being on my own. I hate men, with their nasty thoughts and their prowling ways. But I haven't met any that I liked. If I had, perhaps I shouldn't be here now. If we get taken on at the Pall Mall it'll be nothing but men, men, men. We shall get no peace."

"You paint everything in such somber colors. There must be light as well as shade."

"There's a lot of limelight, if that's what you mean; but the shade's all the darker for it. Oh, I can tell you the stage is a rotten place if you've got no money or no friends or no chap at the back of you. I'm not saying that for the sake of talking. It's good enough for any one like me. But when I see a blind man crossing the road I always wish I could make him see, and as I'm not God Almighty the only thing I can do is to give him a hand. That's how I feel about you. The traffic's dangerous enough when you've got eyes in your head, like I have. It's all traffic on the stage. I suppose you think you'll be able to look after yourself? Well, you wait and see. There'll be Mr. Johnnie at the stage-door asking you to hop into his landaulette because the road's slippery or some such nonsense. But what's the use of trying to convince anybody? I can see I shan't put you off the stage.... I'll help you to look for a room, unless—" Maggy's volubility checked for a moment. "—unless you'd like to chum with me. I'm just what you see. Nothing hidden up my sleeve; no drink and no boy."

She saw Alexandra wince at her plain language, and watched her anxiously. Hardly ever before had she sought the companionship of another girl, nor could she quite understand the motive that was making her do so now.

Her extreme candor certainly had a startling effect on Alexandra. She had never met any one so outspoken. But she put the right construction on Maggy's frankness, recognized it as a manifestation of genuineness and honesty, and succumbed to it as she had to the girl's fascinating vivacity. She was altogether drawn towards her. Again, Maggy stood to her as the personification of the new life she had elected to make her own.

Maggy was looking at her expectantly, looking and smiling. There was something very compelling in her smile.

"I'd like to chum," said Alexandra impulsively.

III

When Maggy spoke of the stage she generally meant the Pall Mall Theater. Just now it was in her thoughts more than any other, perhaps because she had met Alexandra there, but also because she was inclined to think that Alexandra and she had made a favorable impression on its stage-manager.

The Pall Mall, De Freyne, its lessee and manager, and the Pall Mall chorus are a trinity known the world over. Productions at the Pall Mall invariably enjoy

success. Long runs prevail there. That was one of the reasons why Maggy looked forward to an engagement at that theater. Another was the pay, rather more than was obtainable elsewhere. In other respects it offered her no advantages and some drawbacks. She had, for instance no aspiration to become one of a chorus whose unrivaled attractions marked it out as a sort of human *delicatessen* for the consumption of epicurean males. On the other hand, De Freyne was indifferent to expense on the question of costume, and that had had considerable weight with Maggy. Like any other pretty girl she reveled in beautiful clothes, even though they should only be on loan to her for an hour or two out of the twenty-four. On tour the dresses were often effective enough at a distance, but either of inferior material or their pristine freshness considerably depreciated by having seen previous service in a London theater. That militated against the pleasure of wearing them. At the Pall Mall everything would be new and the best that money could buy.

That De Freyne's object in dressing his chorus regardless of cost was a licentious one, the desire to make his two-score of attractive-looking girls still more attractive in the eyes of the *jeunesse dorée*, who filled his stalls, was no deterrent to Maggy on her own account. She did think of it in regard to Alexandra. She wondered whether Alexandra would be affected by the demoralizing influence of those beautiful clothes which at the Pall Mall were fashioned to display a girl's physical charms to the very limit of decency. It ended in her being almost sorry that Alexandra's innocence and the callousness of an agent should have sent her to the voice trial.

How Alexandra was to make a good impression on the public by posturing in the chorus was not explained to her. It was the expression of an opinion which she could take or leave. In her innocence she made the common error of imagining that the public chooses its plays, its novels, its pictures, its music and its actors and actresses for itself. She did not stop to think that there might be gradations in that public or that the vast majority of it is deprived of selective taste by the interested parties who cater for it. Generalizing by the noise the public makes with its hands when it approves of anything, she argued that everything it applauds must be good. The noise is there right enough and the approval is genuine; but that has to be discounted by the fact that the public has nothing better to approve of. For the public—the crowd—is a led horse most of the time. It is enormously manageable. It does what it is told and goes where it is taken. Its taste has never been given a chance of becoming educated because of the fare that has been forced upon it. Its purveyors feed it as injuriously as an ignorant man will a horse. For the want of anything better the horse will eat what is given it. So with the public. Obviously the public never has anything to do with the choice of a play. Nobody has except the man who buys it and puts it on the stage.

Following the simile of the led horse and the proverb that, though you may take it to the water you cannot make it drink, the public likewise will once in a way evince the same sort of stubbornness. Then the play that failed to "go down" is unostentatiously withdrawn, or the pretender to histrionic laurels unable to obtain them will try his or her luck again in another piece with another's money behind it.

After all, it is but a question of credulity. Even Alexandra had to conform to it. She was advised to apply for a place in the chorus and she did so. With her necessarily vague ideas about the chorus she did not think of it as anything very dreadful. It did not offer so good a footing on the stage as she desired, that was all. She did not, for instance, believe all the disparaging things Maggy said about the stage. She appreciated that on the stage a girl might be unduly exposed to temptation, but in her austerity that was no reason for yielding to it. In her Arcadian purity she could not conceive of circumstances, however degrading, having any adverse effect on herself. Nor could she credit Maggy's insistent assertion that without money or influence an actress must remain in the depths. She believed, as inexperience always does, that talent is bound to be recognized sooner or later. The creed of the chorus girl, unspoken, unwritten, was yet hers to learn.

For ten days the two girls heard nothing from the Pall Mall Theater. It was possible, if not probable, that they might not hear at all. Meanwhile Maggy went about with Alexandra looking for an engagement in some other direction. It was a matter of urgency to both of them to get something to do. Maggy had been out of an engagement for two months. She was in Mrs. Bell's debt, and she owed money to a doctor. Alexandra was little better off. As the orphaned daughter of an officer she had a pension of £40 a year so long as she remained unmarried. But with the expense she had been put to in coming to town and in spite of the strictest economy it was not enough to live on.

She could not help being anxious about the future; more so than Maggy. Maggy, though she chafed at them, was accustomed to bad times: Alexandra had never struck them before. Hardly had she got over the illusion of imagining that a small part in a London theater was obtainable than she found herself in no request even for the chorus. It was terribly disappointing. They were forever haunting stage-doors and the crowded waiting rooms of theatrical agencies. For hours every day they wandered about the Strand and its environs.

But for the prospect of sheer want confronting them they would have been quite happy. The bond that united them was based on mutual respect as well as affection. Disappointment and privation only cemented it. In these days when the stale breakfast egg was a comestible to be shared, when anything better than canned food became a luxury, their friendship remained free from any of the pet-

tinesses which generally characterize the intimacy of people living under conditions of hardship.

The stoicism of a family of soldiers supported Alexandra. She had the pride of race that refuses to surrender to misfortune. Her grit, astonishing in one so delicately reared, surprised Maggy. She began to look up to Alexandra as a being of a superior world in which the virtues, being Anglo-Indian, were of a particularly high order. She had a very nebulous conception of the meaning of the term.

Just as Alexandra found it absorbing to listen to Maggy's stage talk, even though it was humorously misogynistic, so nothing pleased Maggy so much as to listen to Alexandra's narration of life in an Indian military station. It sounded to her like a history of the high gods: a medley of color, warmth and ease, good living and brass bands. She loved to hear of parades and polo, of the troops of servants, the gymkhanas and dances, all the social amusements and advantages of the sahib caste. From habit, Alexandra would use native words when talking of these things, and Maggy's unaccustomed brain never quite differentiated between *syce*, *hazari*, *maidan*, *ayah*, *chit*, *durzi*, *kitmagar*, *butti*, *tikka-gari* and such-like terms in common use with Anglo-Indians. But they impressed her immensely.

The amount of talk they got through in these early days of their friendship was stupendous. It helped to relieve the harassing search after employment and its invariable ill-success.

One morning, three weeks after their first meeting, Maggy sprang out of bed to gather up two letters which their landlady had pushed under the door. On the flaps were inspiring words in red lettering.

"Pall Mall Theater! Hooroo! One for each of us!" she cried, and danced about in her nightdress.

Alexandra, behind an improvised screen formed of a shawl over the towel rail, was having her morning bath in a zinc tub of inadequate size.

"Open mine," she called. "I'm wet."

She waited anxiously. There came the sound of tearing paper and then Maggy's voice, raised excitedly:

"Pull that old shawl down, Lexie! If you don't practise on me you'll die of shyness and no clothes at the Pall Mall. We're engaged! Rehearsal Thursday.

Eleven o'clock!"

IV

It was past one o'clock. For over two hours without a pause the chorus had been going through their "business" in the new play with the reiteration that exasperates the teacher and the taught. The girls had relapsed into sulkiness, the stage-manager's temper was ruffled. Even the pianist in the O.P. corner by the footlights felt the reaction. His hands rested on the keys without energy.

Powell, the stage-manager, faced the forty girls standing in a semi-circle, three-deep. The majority of them were dressed in the ultra-fashionable style of the moment, some very expensively, a few with taste. The exceptions were Maggy and Alexandra. He knew they were all tired and rebellious; but he was concerned only with their recalcitrant feet.

"Now then, girls. Once more."

The pianist's hands came down heavily on the opening chords of a dance movement.

"La-la-la—da-di-dum—point! Step it out. Don't mince!"

A tall girl, gorgeously arrayed, brought the dance to a stop by leaving her position in the front row.

"I'm not going to stick here all day," she announced defiantly. "I'm lurching with my boy, and he won't wait."

"Get back to your place, Miss Mortimer," snapped Powell.

"Not me. I'm going."

As she began to cross the stage on her way out a voice came from the depths of the auditorium:

"Miss Mortimer, we're not concerned with your private appointments. If they're to interfere with your work here you can look for another engagement somewhere else."

The show-girl glanced in the direction of the voice and shrugged.

"Mean you'll fire me, Mr. De Freyne? Well, I don't care. Pa's rich!"

She walked off jauntily, her high heels clicking on the boards, a costly plume streaming over her left ear. The lessee of the Pall Mall Theater said nothing. He was mildly amused. He stood in the dark at the back of the dress circle complacently regarding his theatrical seraglio. All the girls were pretty, or if not

pretty, showy. Some had been selected for their figures, some for their faces, some for both. No duchess, not even a fashionable duchess, was arrayed like one of these. Solomon in all his glory might perhaps have competed with them, but not the lilies of the field. Presently De Freyne's gimlet eyes picked out Maggy and Alexandra. Their appearance disturbed his equanimity.

He watched them attentively for ten minutes or so, at the end of which period the tired stage-manager dismissed the chorus for the morning. De Freyne's authoritative voice again made itself heard.

"Miss Delamere and Miss Hersey. Step up to my room before you go, please. I want to speak to you."

The girls exchanged scared glances. A special interview with De Freyne was sufficiently unusual to fill them with dismay. He was not in the habit of detaining members of his chorus for the fun of the thing.

They groped their way along dim, soft-carpeted passages to the front of the house and entered the managerial office. De Freyne was blunt to a degree. He wasted no time.

"You two girls have got to make more of a show," he told them. "I can't have shabby dresses at the Pall Mall."

Alexandra was too taken aback by this curt rebuke to make any reply; but Maggy lost her temper.

"Meaning flash clothes and jewelry?" she bit out. "How do you expect us to do it on thirty-five shillings a week, Mr. De Freyne?"

"I'm not interested in your resources," was De Freyne's cold answer.

"You ought to be. You ought to get a pencil and slate and write down the cost of lodgings, food, boots, and all the rest of it, and figure out how little we've got left to buy clothes with—unless we don't care who buys them for us. *We're* not that sort—not yet."

"You must look smarter," reiterated De Freyne, showing no resentment at this tirade. "You silly creatures, don't you want to attract attention?"

"We'll attract attention on the night. Don't worry," said Maggy. She was afraid of De Freyne, but she did not let her voice show it.

"That's all very well, but you know the unwritten clause of my agreement with you all. The ladies of my chorus have got to be dressed decently off the stage as well as on.... Anyhow, there it is. Take it or leave it." He dismissed them with a nod.

Neither said anything until they had passed out of the stage-door and were in the street.

"That means new clothes," said Alexandra in a tone of deep depression.

"Or Dick Whittington!" Maggy rejoined dryly. "Turn and turn again—our dresses. I'll have a go at yours to-night, Lexie. Look, there's Mortimer and her

boy.”

A big car slid past them, ridiculously upholstered in white velvet. An effete-looking youth and the girl who had stated that her “pa” was rich lolled in the back seat.

Maggy’s eyes followed them speculatively.

“Wonder if there’s anything in it?” she remarked.

“In what?”

“In that sort of a good time. Flat, money, pet dog, car, week-ends at Brighton—enough to eat.”

“I don’t want to think about it.”

“Neither do I. But I have lately. I’m wondering what on earth we’re standing out for. No one thinks any the better of us for it. The girls all think us fools, and the men just grin and wait.”

“Don’t talk about it. Talking makes it all seem worse.”

“One day I shall do more than talk. I shall walk off.”

Alexandra said nothing. She knew Maggy’s mood. Maggy was hungry, tired, and cross. Motives of economy impelled them towards their lodgings, where half a tin of sardines was waiting to be consumed. Neither had had anything to eat since early morning. And when they had lunched they would have to walk back to the theater for rehearsal again at three. Maggy suddenly halted before a Lyons’ depot.

“Come on in, Lexie,” she said. “We can’t wait. We shan’t be home till past two. And if we’re late back we’ll be fined.”

“There’s the tin of—” Alexandra began and stopped.

Maggy had pushed open the swing doors. The grateful smell of hot and well-made coffee and savory, nourishing food, cheapness notwithstanding, made her surrender to temptation. Deprivation has this effect. De Freyne, lurching expensively at the Savoy, recognizing here and there approved members of his chorus and their cavaliers, could not be expected to know anything of empty stomachs. Besides, it was their own fault if the girls did not know which side their bread was buttered.

They sat down at one of the marble-topped tables. A waitress came towards them.

“Two cups of coffee, rolls and butter—”

This was Alexandra’s order.

“Coffee, rolls, and two steak-and-kidney puddings,” augmented Maggy recklessly.

Unmoved, the attendant went off to execute the order.

Maggy met Alexandra’s startled eyes. Her own were defiant.

“Don’t tell me,” she said. “It’ll cost us nearly eighteenpence. I don’t care.

I'm going to pay, and if I don't go bust that way I shall do something worse. We're going to feed, dear!"

V

"Damn! She's turned off the gas!"

Maggy stopped machining. The small room was plunged in darkness. Alexandra groped for matches and lit the candles. It was not easy to work by the flickering light, but both girls went on with what they were doing. There was something grim about the task. One associates the alteration of frills and furbelows with some small pleasure to the adapter; but there was none here. Necessity impelled them, kept them out of their beds. They were heavy with sleep. The air of the room was close and unpleasant.

Maggy had all but finished turning Alexandra's coat and skirt. Alexandra had adapted two Indian shawls into an effective dress for Maggy. The work was too hastily done to bear inspection at close quarters or much strain by its wearer. They had been steadily at it for five hours.

It was Maggy who gave in first. She finished machining with a savage jerk, leaving the handle to revolve by itself.

"Let's go to bed," she said. "I'll get up half an hour earlier and finish that."

Alexandra went on. She was not going to be beaten for the sake of half an hour. Besides, she knew that Maggy in the cashmere shawl arrangement would please De Freyne. She, at any rate, would pass muster.

"I'm not so very tired now," she answered without looking up, "and I may be in the morning."

Maggy shook her hair down and slipped out of her clothes with the celerity that comes of practise between the acts. She did not even trouble to take the paint off her face. She got into bed and lay watching Alexandra working by the guttering candle-light. She did not talk. She was too utterly tired.

At last Alexandra's work was done. She hung up the dress and put away the needles and cotton. She had a strong inclination to get into bed without more ado than Maggy had shown; but habit was not to be denied. She knew she would not be able to rest properly unless she was clean and cool. She brushed her hair, washed her face and hands, brushed her teeth. A huge sigh from Maggy's bed made her turn.

"Am I keeping you awake?"

"No. I sighed because you're so different to me. *I* couldn't wash to-night. And I knew my hair'd be a mat in the morning and the pillow pink from my cheeks."

"I wish you didn't paint. There's no harm in girls doing it if they need it, but you spoil yourself."

"Force of habit. Mother made up my face from the time I was ten."

Alexandra in her nightdress knelt down at the side of her bed. Maggy never said prayers. To see Alexandra say them, she said, was the nearest she would ever get to such things. She had never been taught to pray when a child.

"Might as well drop Him a hint that we're at the end of our tether," she suggested presently.

When Alexandra rose from her knees Maggy was sitting up in bed watching her, her hands clasping her legs.

"And you mean to say that you believe somebody hears you!" she said wonderingly.

"Yes."

"And does what you ask?"

"Yes—in the end."

"Then He must be pretty deaf.... You look nice saying your prayers. If I were God I couldn't refuse you anything. P'raps He's a woman-hater. Women get the worst of it everywhere, I think. If we do wrong, we have to pay for it. If we don't do wrong, we have to pay just the same. We're made so that we're not fit to be working all the time. Oh, it's a hell of a world for women! I can stand anything when I feel it's fair and just. I can't see any justice where we're concerned. They have an inspector Johnnie to see that the scales in the grocery-shops are fair, but if a woman wants to make a bargain she's got to do it on the heavy side."

"The law courts are the scales."

"The law? Aren't the scales against us there too? If we want a divorce we've got to be knocked about as well as—other things. If we're deserted and ruined before we're married we can get so many shillings a week until the kid's in his teens. And if there's no kid or it dies, well, p'raps your God'll help us, but the law won't. It's all too hard to fight against, and one can't make head or tail of it. Look at the White Slave Traffic. They'll flog a man if they catch him at it, but they won't flog De Freyne and give him hard labor for the dirty work he's doing every day of his life, though everybody knows about it. Why, he's only a—what's it called?—procurer for the nobility and gentry and all the rich bounders. And we're not all in yet, but we shall be. My word, one hears a lot about the chorus-girl being on the make-haste and living you-know-how. One doesn't hear how

she's driven into it, like cattle into a dirty pen. I'm done, Lexie. I shan't hold out long."

Alexandra blew out the remaining candle. In the darkness one could just make out the two narrow beds and the glimmer of the window.

"You mustn't give in, Maggy," came Alexandra's voice after a pause. "When one meets the man one cares about one doesn't want to come to him with nothing to give."

"Why not? There isn't a man in a hundred who comes to a woman with a clean slate. Why should they expect us to have nothing written on ours?"

"Because when a man marries nature makes him want a pure woman, not for his own sake but because of the children she will probably have. For myself, I know I would rather show a clean slate to the man I loved and who loved me in a decent way whatever his life had been, than let a man who was nothing to me write his name there first. That must be wrong because it's against nature."

"Is it? I don't know. You can argue better than I can. You don't lose your temper. Let's bring it down to ourselves and our difficulties. The stage is a honey-pot and we girls are the honey in it, and the men are the flies buzzing round. They won't leave us alone. They make it almost impossible for us to live a decent life. And if it's decent it isn't beautiful. You can't call it beautiful, Lexie. This room's the limit. Think of the food we eat. Generally beastly. And our clothes. Everything's ugly and makeshift, and yet we've only got to stretch out our little fingers—"

"More than our little fingers."

"Well, if you like. Anyway, what are we waiting for? There's no sense in it. It won't get us any forrader. Why don't you leave me alone? I'd almost made up my mind to give in when I met you. I should rather enjoy cutting a dash and having everything I want and going one better than the other girls who crow over us, and snapping my fingers at the management like Mortimer did to-day. If a man was going to marry me and give me a nice broad ring and a little home there'd be some reason for going on like this and keeping good; but men don't ask chorus-girls to marry them, as a rule—not by a long chalk! Oh, goodnight!"

She twisted on to her side, and the bedsprings groaned.

From neighboring churches clocks began striking twelve. The noises from the street subsided. Only an occasional footfall was heard or a cart rumbling past. Sometimes a shrill voice broke the stillness, sometimes a drunken song.

The girls slept.

At dawn a cool breeze moved the dingy window curtain. Maggy woke and peered through the gray light at Alexandra, sleeping.

She looked as though she were dead and at peace.

Maggy wondered if that was the better fate.

VI

De Freyne did not seem to notice the efforts of the two girls in obeying his instructions to smarten up their appearance: he said nothing. But for all that, the change did not escape him. Maggy, in the draped cashmere affair struck him as likely to appeal to a Jew or a gentleman from Manchester. He had a particular individual of each type in his mind, and awaited a propitious moment for exploiting her to one or the other. For the next few days the attention of the girls would have to be devoted to rehearsals, not men.

De Freyne's exploitation of his chorus naturally had its roots in commercialism and self-interest. The girls themselves very seldom thanked him for his introductions. They were astute enough to understand that the advantage was at least mutual. Not that De Freyne expected any thanks. It was a trite observation of his that theatrical people were the most ungrateful lot in the world. He himself was a shining illustration of the dictum, but that did not lessen its truth. He got his "turn" from his wealthy stage-door dilettanti. It might be a social one in the shape of admittance to elevated circles; a select club, a shooting party, a cruise on a big yacht. Sometimes it was an invitation by a young and indiscreet member of the peerage to his country house and a photograph in the illustrated papers to proclaim it. De Freyne was very partial to reading beneath the group: "From left to right: The Marquis of Perth, Lady Angela Coniston, Sir Francis Manningtree, Mr. De Freyne...." This was prestige dear to his heart. He toed the line successfully between Society and Bohemianism. Most of the rich rascals and all the rich fools of the world were at his service.

But what gave him most satisfaction was to be able to put an important City man under an obligation. It often resulted in special information concerning stocks and shares that brought him large profits. He would have sacrificed any girl's reputation for a one-fourth per cent. turn of the market, and frequently did so.

In this regard he mentally pigeon-holed Maggy. It would not be difficult to find her a partner in the dance to which he should set the Mephistophelean measure. Alexandra he looked at with a cold eye. He wasn't sure of her. He had nothing to say against her looks, but he had no use for prudish high-steppers.

Quick of apprehension where girls were concerned, he put her down in that category. The chorus would bear thinning out a bit. As a matter of policy, De Freyne always engaged more girls than he wanted.

For another week rehearsals went on, growing more frequent and longer. The clever stage-manager goes nearer creating silk purses out of sows' ears than any human being. No one in the early days of rehearsal would associate the pouting, obtuse, wooden young woman with the airy fairy sylphs who ravish the eye on a first night; yet they are one and the same, trained by methods similar to those used in schooling performing animals, by coaxing, bullying and inexhaustible patience.

When the chorus were at last up to concert pitch and the principals letter-perfect, the dress rehearsal took place. Maggy was in the front row, looking big and beautiful in a Futurist creation of rose fleshings and black chiffon. The front row girls were very carefully chosen for opulence of figure. Alexandra had been relegated to the back. She was disappointing in tights, which means nothing more than that if a butcher did not approve her an artist might.

It was over at last, the long performance with its glitter, glare and gaiety. There was nothing in it, but all London would flock to see it because the music was catchy and the girls so pretty and the whole show so symbolical of the light side of life. For several days afterwards rehearsals were frequent. The usual "cuts" and alterations had to be made, the show licked into shape.

On one of these occasions Maggy received a message from De Freyne. He wanted to see her. Leaving Alexandra in the dressing room she went up to the managerial office. It was nearly one o'clock.

"I'm glad you took my advice," he said in a friendly tone. "You've been turning yourself out much better."

"Thanks," Maggy answered. "Is that all?"

"No. I'm going to put you in the way of dressing really well. A very decent chap wants to know you. You'll be lucky if he likes you."

"That's your opinion. Well, he can like me as much as he likes. But I'm straight."

De Freyne chewed the end of his mustache.

"You get these silly notions from the girl you live with," he said impatiently. "I'll mix advice with a bit of prophecy. If you don't try and make yourselves more agreeable you'll find you're in—"

"Queer Street?"

"It's equivalent—Garrick Street and Maiden Lane—out of a shop. It doesn't hurt you to be nice to a fellow, does it? He may ask you to lunch. Duchesses

lunch.”

”I’m not a duchess, and I’m particular who I lunch with.”

At the end of her sentence the door opened and a man looked in. He had heard her, and was amused.

Maggy’s look as she turned to acknowledge De Freyne’s introduction was inimical. She knew perfectly well what that introduction portended. She must be hard. She had repulsed other men. She could take care of herself. But this man—what was his name—Woolf?—loomed tall and big over her, big as Fate, possessive. He exercised a spell: he appealed to her. She knew it in the first moment that she looked at him. She knew she would like to lunch with him, and that she would inwardly be disappointed if she had the strength of mind to refuse. When the invitation came she accepted it with cheeky reservation.

”All right, Mr. Woolf, so long as you don’t think I’m Little Red Riding-hood and included in the menu.”

The capitulation satisfied her conscience. Then she remembered Alexandra.

”I must go and tell my friend not to wait for me,” she said.

”Miss Hersey?” supplied De Freyne. ”You might also ask her to come in here in ten minutes, will you?”

”My car’s outside,” said Woolf. ”You’ll find me at the stage-door.”

Maggy ran along to the dressing room where she had left Alexandra. The other girls had gone.

”Lexie, I’m going out to lunch,” she began breathlessly. ”I wish you were coming too. Do you mind? I shan’t be long. I’ll cut home as quickly as I can.”

She could not hide her excitement. It showed in an added sparkle of the eyes, a catch in the voice. Alexandra wondered what else besides an invitation to lunch could have created this effect. It caused her vague uneasiness. But prospective enjoyment was so clearly written all over Maggy’s face that she refrained from expressing it.

”Of course I don’t mind,” she said. ”I hope you will enjoy yourself.”

”You are a dear!” Maggy felt awkward. ”You—you don’t think it’s wrong?”

”There’s nothing wrong in going to lunch with anybody. Especially if he’s—all right, and knows you are, too.”

”He’s nice, I think.”

”I’m glad. But be careful, Maggy.”

”Rather!”

Maggy moved to one of the mirrors and took up a powder-puff.

”You’ve got heaps on already,” deprecated Alexandra.

”Have I?” She powdered over the rouge. ”I do look rather like puff pastry—in layers, don’t I? Well, I haven’t time to take any of it off. Lexie, De Freyne wants

to see you in a minute or two. I don't think it's anything important. He seems in a good temper. Ta-ta, dear."

She ran out and made for the stage-door where Woolf was waiting for her. His car, a big open one, was drawn up opposite it. Maggy wished the girls had not all gone. They had twitted her so often about her lack of a male escort. Now there was no one to see her get in.

"Where are we going?" she asked. "The Savoy?"

"Not this time," said Woolf. "My house is not far off."

"I'd prefer the Savoy," she persisted, although she had never actually been to that restaurant.

Woolf was the sort of man who invariably gets his own way with women. In addition to being characteristically obstinate he was indifferent to any opinion that clashed with his own. If it was one that suited him so much the better; if not, he ignored it. So long as he paid the piper he considered he had the right to call the tune. But before paying he scanned the bill carefully. He was not a gentleman. He met gentlemen sometimes, and was adaptive enough to be mistaken for one. He belonged to one or two nearly-good clubs. He was a man about town in the sense that he was to be seen wherever money could purchase an entrance.

"You'll be quite chaperoned at my place," he assured Maggy. "I've a man and his wife."

"I don't need a man and his wife to look after me," she retorted sharply.

He gave her an attentive stare. "Who does look after you?" His meaning was obvious.

"Myself, of course. Why don't we go to the Savoy?"

"How persistent you are. Do you want to know why, really? Promise you won't be offended?"

"If I am I'll hop out."

"Well ... when you let me buy you some pretty clothes I'll take you there."

He half expected she might "hop out," especially as the car had come to a standstill in a traffic block. She looked hot-tempered. But Maggy was too level-headed to be sensitive on the score of clothes.

"I suppose that king in the story wouldn't have been seen with his beggar maid at the Savoy until he'd dressed her out," she remarked ironically. "Well, you won't go there with me any time, anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because this young woman provides her own wardrobe."

"We shall see."

Woolf liked her spirit, otherwise her independence might have irritated him.

Arrived at his house he gave her in charge of his man's wife. Maggy dis-

liked the woman on sight. There was something furtive about her. She gave the impression of being one who was used to waiting on ladies in a single man's house. Sly and secret amusement lurked in her eyes. She lingered, unostentatiously, while Maggy prinked herself in front of the glass. After a minute or two she turned, and intimated that she was ready.

"Wouldn't you like to take off your hat, miss?"

There was something unpleasantly insinuating in the smooth tones.

"No, thanks," said Maggy shortly.

"You've left your purse on the table, miss."

"Have I? There's nothing in it. It'll be quite safe."

The woman led the way downstairs and ushered her into a room half-library, half-drawing-room.

"Find everything you wanted?" inquired Woolf, coming forward to meet her.

"Yes, thanks. What a swanky bed-room! Silver hair-brushes and face powder and hairpins! Is it yours?"

"No, it's the visitors' room. I'm glad you like it."

"I didn't say I liked it. It looked as if you always had it ready for a lady. I don't like the look of your man's wife either."

Woolf laughed at the downright expression of opinion.

"She's all right," he said significantly. "She's as quiet as the grave and much deeper."

"She's no good."

"Who is! Are you?" He took her hand and tried to draw her to him. Maggy's form grew rigid.

"Hands off," she said coolly. "There's nothing doing here."

"Won't you let me kiss you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"For the same reason that I keep my hat on, and you don't. One's out of respect for me and the other's respect for myself."

"You're a funny girl!" Woolf drew back and looked at her. "Why are you on the defensive?"

"Haven't I need to be?"

"Not with me, surely. I want to be friends with you."

"Friends!" She threw up her chin aggressively. "I've only got one in the world."

"And who is he?" Woolf asked with quick curiosity.

"She's a girl. I chum with her."

"Women can't be friends with each other," he asserted didactically. "Espe-

cially when they're of the same profession. A Hottentot woman and her civilized sister have only one occupation—the study and pursuit of man. You're like doctors, all at each other's throats. Some of you practise homeopathy, the others are allopaths. The first marry and take their husbands in small doses, the allopaths believe in quantity. Your friend would probably leave you to-morrow if she got a good enough chance."

"Talk about some one you know," Maggy responded.

The contentious conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Woolf's man announcing lunch. They went into the dining room. Maggy was hungry and did justice to an excellent meal. But she refused to drink anything stronger than lemon squash, and when Woolf pressed her for her reason for such abstinence she gave him none. She had seen her mother suffer from alcoholic excess. The smell of spirits always turned her sick.

When they were alone Woolf leant towards her.

"Now let's talk," he said. "What do you want me to do for you?"

"Nothing," replied Maggy shortly.

"Do you dislike me?"

She looked at him and away again.

"No. That doesn't mean you're fascinating. You're the sort of man who might get round a girl like me if I was fool enough to listen to you. Lexie—that's my chum—would tell you off at once."

"I should think she's a man-hater." Woolf was beginning to feel a distinct antipathy towards Maggy's friend.

"No, she isn't. Only men aren't much in our line. You can see prowling beasts without going to the Zoo."

Maggy's conversational trick of generalizing led away from the point Woolf wanted to press.

"You doubt me," he said. "You'd believe in me if I wanted to marry you—"

"Oh, cut it! You don't!" she interjected.

"Marriage is an institution for the protection of women who wear flannel petticoats. It doesn't follow that a girl can't trust a man because he offers her a lot more than most wives get."

"He offers her a lot more because he knows it won't last for long. I'm practical."

"If you were practical you'd listen to my offer."

"Oh, I'll listen."

"Well, I'd like to make you really comfortable. You ought to have a smart little place of your own, and dainty things, and money to spend."

"It's as old as the hills. I daresay I'm not the only girl you've made that proposition to. Try somebody else. I'm going now."

"You mean you won't think about it?"

Maggy was silent for a minute.

"Oh, I shall think about it right enough, don't you worry," she said in an odd voice. "I shall think about it when I'm hungry. I shall think about it when I'm tired. It's a long way from the theater to King's Cross Road. I shall think about it when I see the other girls sneering at me because I haven't got a boy. I shall think about it in the summer time when people go to the sea and take off their clothes, and I shall think of it in the winter when I'd like a few more on. You needn't think I don't know that you're tempting me." Her voice nearly broke.

"Then be friends," urged Woolf again. "What's to prevent you?"

"Lexie. Lexie would be cut up. Lexie has made me think more of myself since I've known her than I ever did before. If it wasn't for her do you think I'd traipse home night after night to that slummy little room that's dear at fifteen shillings a week? *She's* not used to the life, and if she can hold out against it I ought to be able to who've never known anything better. Well, thanks for a nice lunch. You've fed the hungry. That's one good mark for you."

Woolf led her back into the other room and shut the door.

"You'll kiss me before you go," he said imperiously.

He had her by the wrists. His strong grasp sent a thrill through her. Though she resisted she wished there were no harm in letting him kiss her, wished that his offer were not based on wrong-doing. It was not only because he could give her material things that she was tempted. She had stumbled across a man who made a direct call to her nature, and she knew it. De Freyne, callously unselective, could not have deliberately chosen an individual more likely to encompass Maggy's surrender. Woolf was not young; nearly forty. But he was so blatantly good-looking, so—so swaggering. Maggy knew he was selfish and probably a little unkind, possibly bad-tempered, that he would never care for a woman in the way that women crave to be cared for, tenderly, protectively. All the same, she knew that she would get too fond of him if she saw him often and that he would go to her head....

Even now she felt dizzy. Her habitual self-confidence deserted her. She experienced an overmastering desire to fling herself into his arms and cry and cry, to tell him how difficult everything was, and how she had tried.... But she knew perfectly well that he would not understand. He was a man who would never understand women's feelings because he did not think them worth understanding. As long as there were women in the world, plenty of pretty ones, their feelings did not matter. Flowers did not feel when one picked them, or if they did, well, that was what they were there for: to be picked.

"You don't want to kiss me against my will, do you?"

Maggy struggled free. As a matter of fact Woolf's grasp had relaxed. He

was quite ready for the interview to end. He had a business appointment at three and did not want to be late for it. If Maggy had offered him her soul at three that afternoon, or what interested him far more, her substance, he would not have foregone his appointment. That was the man.

"Well, good-by," he said, without further persuasion. "You can go home in my car. I'll 'phone to the garage now."

Maggy went to get her purse and gloves. When she returned Woolf was no longer in the room. It was five minutes to three.

"The car is at the door, miss," the man told her. "Mr. Woolf had an appointment to keep. He asked me to say would you ring him up any time you wished to speak to him. This is his telephone number, miss." He handed her a card.

He helped her into the car and tucked the linen rug round her with just that touch of familiarity which the good servant avoids. Maggy knew perfectly well what he and his wife thought about her. Unused as she was to servants, good or bad, she was quick enough to appreciate that they took their tone from their employer and his habits.

She leant back in the car and gave herself up to the luxury of being driven in it. The celerity with which she was whirled from the affluence of Piccadilly and Regent Street to the grimy purlieus of the King's Cross Road had a disheartening effect upon her. When the chauffeur stopped at her door she was sure she saw disparagement in his face. He would return to his own place and tell Woolf's man and his wife to what sort of a lodging-house he had taken her, and they would make impertinent jokes at her expense. She despised herself for caring what the man thought or said. Alexandra wouldn't have cared a button. She would have scorned the man for scorning her.

She went upstairs slowly. The period of reaction had arrived. It depressed her. The lunch was over; the pleasant excitation Woolf's company had aroused had died down. She felt "flat."

To her surprise Alexandra was not in. She put the kettle on the gas-ring and took out their tea-cups from the cupboard where they were kept. She was rather glad she had got in before her friend. It would show how she cared about her, to have hurried home and made tea.... Good old Lexie!

At the sound of steps outside she called out:

"Hurry up, Lexie. Tea!"

It was Mrs. Bell, not Alexandra.

"I've brought the bill," she observed, depositing a half sheet of paper on the table. "I'd be glad to have it squared soon. You're still one-ten behind."

"We haven't got it yet."

"You'll pay me soon? I shall have to let the room if you don't. Letting's all I have to depend on, you know. By the way, I ought to have told you, it'll be

seventeen and six a week now instead of fifteen. The rents of these houses have gone up.”

”Since I drove here in a car,” snapped Maggy. ”We’ll pay you and clear.”

”No, don’t do that, dearie. Can’t you just give me a bit on account?”

Maggy opened her purse and held it upside down. She had given threepence to Woolf’s woman, and the remaining threepence to the chauffeur. They had despised the coppers, naturally, and barely thanked her. They would not have thanked her at all but for the possibility that they might see her again under more affluent circumstances.

”Something’ll happen soon,” said the woman, thinking of the car. ”I’ll treat you kind because I’ve a kind ’eart.”

She stood away from the door to let Alexandra, who had come up, pass into the room. Maggy looked up quickly. Something was wrong. She saw it at once.

”So I’ll let it stand over,” went on Mrs. Bell. ”The bill,” she explained to Alexandra. ”It seems as it’s not convenient for you to pay it yet. It’s disappointing, but I suppose—”

”How much is it?” asked Alexandra in a dispirited voice.

”Two pounds—five altogether with last week’s bill.”

To Maggy’s amazement Alexandra handed her the amount.

”Write the receipt and go, please,” she said.

When they were alone Maggy stood still waiting for an explanation.

”Where did you get it?”

To add to her astonishment Alexandra began to cry brokenly. She had never seen her give way before.

”Lexie, darling, what is it?” Her voice was sharp with alarm.

Alexandra stopped crying as suddenly as she had begun.

”A fortnight’s salary in lieu of notice,” she said. ”I think I’ve been walking ever since. The pavements were hot, and—my head.”

Maggy said nothing more. With a world of sympathy in her touch she unpinned Alexandra’s hat. Alexandra sat with her hands in her lap staring in front of her. Maggy knelt on the floor and gently drew off her friend’s shoes, brought slippers and put them on, after which she poured out a cup of tea and silently put it before her.

This was dire news. Lexie would tell her more by and by. Maggy knew she couldn’t talk now. She couldn’t have said a word herself without breaking down. Tea would relieve the tension.

There came an irresolute knock at the door, and their landlady thrust in an arm and a plate.

”Shrimps was passing so I’ve bought you a pint for a relish, dears,” came a conciliatory whine.

To save argument Maggy took them and shut the door again.
 "W-what a mixture!" she gasped hysterically. "Temptation and tea, t-tears and—shrumps!"

VII

Alexandra began to tell about her sudden dismissal. De Freyne had been in a good temper and apparently had no grievance against her. Every one in the chorus knew there was always the chance of not being kept on for the run of the piece. He was the managerial autocrat of stageland and he did what he liked. A fortnight's notice or a fortnight's salary in lieu of notice discharged his obligations so far as his chorus was concerned.

Quite formally and with much the same stereotyped form of regret as an editor employs in rejecting a suitable contribution, he told Alexandra that he did not feel himself justified in retaining her services.

"Are you—dissatisfied with me?" she faltered, utterly taken aback.

"No, not exactly. You're a hard worker."

"Then—?"

"I simply find I don't need you. I'm sorry, but there it is."

"Is it—because I didn't get a new dress when you spoke to us? I couldn't afford to," she said simply.

De Freyne fidgeted with some papers on his desk.

"Oh, that's all finished and done with," he answered without looking at her.

"But I'd like to know where I've failed, please, Mr. De Freyne. It's very important that I should know. I shall have to find another engagement."

De Freyne gave her a searching look.

"You may get on all right elsewhere," he said. "I'll tell you the truth for once in a way. You're not the right type. Don't you see you're not the sort of material I've got to provide? Hang it all, it's my living. Do you think I surround myself with the belles of Houndsditch and the Lord knows where because I like it? The only kind of girl I've any use for is the one who, besides working in business hours, makes a show in smart places the rest of her time. Miss Mortimer was a good instance of what I mean until she got swelled head. You're a lady and you won't do. Forget you are one and you can stop on or come back again. I mean that."

She knew what he meant, and since she had no intention of modeling herself on Miss Mortimer she also did not attempt to argue the matter. De Freyne, for some unaccountable reason, tried to justify himself.

"I daresay you think me a sort of understudy to Apollyon, but if you'll look at things impartially I'm not as bad as all that. The girls I engage come to me knowing I can find them the best market. I give them far better chances than they can get anywhere else. You and your friend are—accidents. You have either got to clear or—conform. In the case of your friend, don't you think it's rather a shame to persuade her to buck up against things? She's not like you. It's not doing her a good turn. I've given her a chance to-day...."

He let the words sink in.

Alexandra left the theater, dismissed.

Her luck looked desperately bad. It was unlikely that she would get another engagement until the autumn, if then. It was a long time to wait. True, she might go and stay with her nearest relatives, the Anglo-Indian Colonel, his wife and daughters, but they lived in Devonshire. Once in Devonshire it was morally certain that she would have to remain there, dependent on people with whom she had nothing in common. Her purse would not allow her to make frequent journeys to London to find work.

She did not want to give up the stage without a struggle. It would be horribly humiliating to own herself beaten. She believed in her dramatic ability. She was not afraid of roughing it, but she had not seen the rocks ahead. When she turned over in her mind other ways of earning a living difficulties presented themselves. She could not do office work: she knew nothing of shorthand or typewriting. She might apply for the post of children's governess or companion, but would she be acceptable for either? There would be questions as to her previous experience. All she would be able to cite would be a fortnight's stage-work in the chorus, hardly the right qualification for a guardian of youth or companionship to a lady! She could picture the instinctive drawing-back of a prospective employer and the murmured "I'm afraid you won't do...."

No, she would have to go on as she had begun or drop by the way.

She walked the sun-blistered pavements, hardly noticing where she was going, trying to think what to do, where to go. The same old heart-rending round would begin again—Denton's, Blackmoore's, Hart's, the lesser known agencies, and "nothing for you to-day. Look in again, dear."

How she was going to live she simply did not know. A fortnight's salary! ... She could not guess how many hundreds of men and women of the same profession as herself were facing the same problem without even the fortnight's salary between them and destitution.

Then there was Maggy. Unless Maggy "conformed," she would be told to

go too. De Freyne's words stuck in her mind: "Isn't it rather a shame to persuade her to buck up against things? It's not doing her a good turn." "Things," of course, was a euphemism for Fate. She had never meant to impose her own moral views on Maggy. She didn't want to spoil her material prospects. Maggy had shown again and again that it was only on her, Alexandra's, account that she had elected to make a stand. There was ever a hint of irresolution behind her apparent firmness. Alexandra was fairly sure that if Maggy found a man who would gain her affection and treat her well she would be ready to be convinced that there was no harm in an unlegalized union. That she had not succumbed in the past was no argument that she would remain unassailable in the future. Alexandra was perhaps standing in her light. In one sense she was protecting her, in the other she was taking the bread out of her mouth. She did not feel herself privileged to coerce the younger girl when she could not help her or even help herself. Maggy was not fiercely virginal. Once she had taken the initial step she would lose her sensitiveness. Nature would demand that she take it sooner or later. She was frail, because at heart she was so simple, so unhesitatingly unafraid to go where her instincts led her.

Alexandra made up her mind that she would not try to influence her. It was not fair. But she hoped she would not yield to temptation. Something in the thought of Maggy surrendering twisted her heartstrings. It made her feel so dreadfully sorry. It was as though she dimly foresaw that if Maggy snatched at the sham thing Joy, she would see it turn to sorrow, to dust and ashes....

She found herself before the door of their lodging. She had walked there mechanically with dragging steps. De Freyne had said that he had given Maggy a chance that afternoon. Alexandra recalled her happy, flushed face, the look of excitement in her eyes. Maggy had evidently liked the man, whoever he was. It was only three o'clock. She did not expect her back yet. She was probably still enjoying herself tremendously. Alexandra wondered how much Maggy cared for her after all, how soon before she would leave her to fight it out alone.

And she found Maggy in before her. Maggy had made tea, she had taken off Alexandra's hat and knelt down and drawn off her shoes....

Alexandra put down her cup and stretched out her hand across the table. Maggy took it and gave it a squeeze.

"There's a bit of poetry I learnt once," she said. "I say it whenever I feel the limit. It's a sort of psalm.

"All's well with the world, my friend,
And there isn't an ache that lasts;

All troubles will have an end,
 And the rain and the bitter blasts.

There is sleep when the evil is done,
 There's substance beneath the foam;
 And the bully old yellow sun will shine
 Till the cows come home!"

"Can't you see 'em in your mind's eye, Lexie dear, a string of them—brown ones with soft eyes—their heads moving from side to side, coming down the long lane just round the turning ... and the sun shining behind them through clouds... Cheer up, ducky!"

VIII

Maggy said very little about Woolf. On certain topics there was a barrier of silence between the two girls, imposed by Alexandra. Maggy was disposed to be utterly unreserved, crude. Brought up in stage surroundings she had heard undiscussable things talked of openly all her life. Alexandra showed such distaste for laxity of speech that Maggy now refrained from touching on the subject of sex almost entirely. Had she been unreserved about Woolf, his conversation with her and her own attitude toward him, she would have had to show herself in a light that Alexandra would have disliked and certainly not understood.

Maggy was never quite sure in her mind whether Alexandra was very cold by nature or completely reserved. She, herself, belonged to the type of woman, not a rare one, who can discuss her marital relations with others with a frankness that no man would ever dream of employing when speaking of his wife to his most intimate friend. Alexandra, except under extraordinary stress, would be as secretive as a man. To discuss sexual emotions or indulge in speculation about them with another girl was a thing quite foreign to her. At school she had, in that sense, been a being apart, while the other girls whispered in corners. Instinctively she shrank from having her mind contaminated by second-hand knowledge of the most vital and delicate functions of nature.

Her upbringing had been different from Maggy's. Maggy's mind had been

forced prematurely on the hot-bed of theatrical laxity. Alexandra's life, up till the last year, had been one of calm and sweet companionship with an adored mother. She had lived a healthy, normal existence, met men of her own class who would no more have dreamt of thinking irreverently of her than of their own mothers or sisters. She was aware that strong passions, illicit unions, and trouble and misery resulting from immorality, did exist in the world. She read of these things in newspapers and the books that were never kept from her; but these passions and unions and dissolving of unions seemed things that did not touch her class.

She came into active collision with them for the first time when she went on the stage. She could not shut her eyes to the condition of things there any more than she could shut her ears to the sordid language of the girls in their common dressing room. But it made her ashamed to be a woman, a being of the same sex. These girls thought of men only in one way. The men whom they spoke of as their "boys" or their "friends" were certainly not any coarser in mind than the girls themselves. They had no more reserves of speech than factory-hands. There were exceptions here and there, but being exceptions they were negligible as a power of reform.

Some girls attained their positions legitimately, she knew; but how few? One could count them on the fingers of one hand. Every one of them had had some one, a mother or a father to look after them, a father who waited at the stage-door every night, a comfortable home. They had been dressed well by their people. Though in the chorus, they had never known its strain and stress, for they had not been of it. Its hardships and temptations had, so to speak, been screened from them, and they had been curiously impervious to its language. Hence it was that their reputations had not suffered.

Even out of musical comedy how few illustrious names were unassociated with scandal. Alexandra had heard the true story of how one of England's most prominent actresses was selected for her first important part—that of a courtesan. An actress sufficiently convincing in the role could not be found, till at last the author of the play exclaimed in exasperation: "Well, if we can't get the actress, let's have the woman." The equivalent had been lauded by the Press and the public, and the author's fees had not appreciably diminished!

Alexandra knew now that her own chance of succeeding through hard work or any talent she might possess was about one in a thousand. She learnt of the many capable actors and actresses—some of them more than capable—who were touring the provinces year after year, and would wear out their souls and their lives touring the provinces. It was more than a hard struggle for the women: women were scarcely given a fighting chance.

Yet all she could do was to fight, fight all the time so as not to drop out; to make a bare living, not to lose sight of ambition's pinnacle while she was forced

to dwell in the plains of penury. But as regards Maggy she would not influence her one way or the other. Maggy would have to decide for herself.

During the ensuing week they were less together than they had ever been. In the morning Maggy was at the theater while Alexandra went the round of the stage-doors to see if there was a chance of her being taken on. Very often they did not meet till after the show in the evening. For the first two nights Alexandra had gone to meet Maggy and had walked back with her; but now Maggy came home in Woolf's car. She said nothing about him. Alexandra asked no questions.

IX

"I've got something to show you," Woolf said. "Hop in."

Maggy got into the car. She had been lunching with Woolf at his house. He always sent her to Sidey Street in his car, but never went there with her. He hated slums and mean streets. He had been born and bred in them and had had enough of them.

"Coming too?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm going to take you to see something I've just fixed up. I want to know what you think of it. It's a flat."

"Oh."

He got in beside her and set the car going. Maggy had been holding him at arm's length all the afternoon. He was getting a little tired of the pursuit and intended it should end. He could not associate Maggy with protracted virtue. If she persisted in this pose—for he thought it was a pose—he would lose interest in her. He had told her as much at lunch.

"Oh, rubbish!" Maggy had responded, munching at a pear that only a rich man could afford to buy out of season. "Courting's a change for you."

"It's too much trouble. In business I work hard. I know what I want and I go on till I get it. With women I don't want hard work. Besides, unripe fruit is sour. It's best when it's ready to fall."

"Then you've come under the wrong tree," she said cheekily.

But she knew that the fruit was trembling on its stem—ripe.

"About this flat," she said, when they were on their way, "are you thinking of moving?"

"No."

Woolf turned and looked at her intently. She could not face the searching in his eyes; she blushed and was angry with herself.

"I don't see what you want my opinion for, anyway," she said, to cover her confusion.

"It's funny, but I do."

He said no more. Maggy's thoughts occupied her for the rest of the drive. She sat back in her seat, out of contact with Woolf. When he was close to her, or his clothing touched her, a breathless sensation assailed her, sapping her strength.

The flat he took her to see was a furnished one in Bloomsbury, small but attractive in her eyes. It contained a bedroom, a bathroom and a sitting room. Meals were obtainable at a reasonable price in a restaurant attached to the building. The rooms had every appearance of being lived in. There were flowers in sitting room and bedroom, magazines, a box of chocolates: on the bedroom dressing-table was a brand-new silver toilette set and brushes. Among the pictures on the walls, framed in black and gold, were several studies of female figures in the nude. The electric lights were rose-shaded.

Maggy was entranced with the place. She forgot her defensive attitude and showed frank pleasure in all she saw. She fingered the silver brushes lovingly, smelt the flowers, munched a chocolate.

The white-tiled bathroom with its plated fittings appealed to her strongly.

"Hot and cold!" she murmured. "Not in bits but all at once. Scrummy!"

"What are you talking about?" said Woolf, amused.

"In Sidey Street we have a foot-bath and wash in bits," she explained frankly. "I've dreamt of baths like this. I've never had one."

She turned on the taps with the fascination of a child, and watched the water run.

"So you like it all?"

"I should just think I did!"

She perched on the edge of the bath, swinging a foot.

"You've really taken it?"

"For three years."

"Who's coming to it?"

"It's for a good girl."

"You mean for a bad girl," she pouted.

"She'll be good—to me."

"Well, I hope she'll like it."

He took her two hands. "So do I, Maggy. She's said so, anyway."

"Meaning me?"

He nodded.

"You've taken it on the chance that I'll come?"

"It's got to be completely furnished. If it wasn't you it would probably be some one I didn't care about half so much. But it's going to be you, isn't it, Maggy?"

"For three years!" Her voice trembled. "And after? What happens when the agreement's run out? Has the girl got to be like the flat—taken on by some one else? There was a play, wasn't there, a few years ago, called 'Love and What Then?' It didn't last long."

She got up and went back into the sitting room. Woolf followed her.

"Won't you trust me and come?"

"If I came I should come without trusting you. I'm not the kind that tiles herself in. I suppose I should let things rip."

"Well, it's yours for the taking. Only you've got to decide—now."

And suddenly Maggy's defenses broke down. She felt the frail bulwarks of her unsheltered girlhood crumbling around her.

"It wouldn't be for the bathroom or the bedroom or what you'd give me," she said huskily.

"Wouldn't it?"

His arms were about her.

"No," she whispered. "It's you."

Woolf gave her a little Yale key.

"Here it is. Let yourself in when you want to take possession."

He had tea sent up from the restaurant and they had it together in the cosy sitting room. Maggy was very subdued. She would go back to Sidey Street only to pack the few personal possessions she treasured. She hoped, was almost sure, Alexandra would be out. She dared not face her just yet.

"I'll bring you back after the show to-night," Woolf reminded her when they parted. "Don't forget I've given you the key."

"I've given you more than a key," said Maggy.

X

"Lexie, I feel a beast, but I've got to go. You'll never understand. That's why I've said so little about him. Woolf, I mean. It isn't only what he can give me,

though it does mean something too. I'm wrong somewhere, I suppose. I don't think about it like you do. And it's all right for girls like me. Perhaps it's the only thing. You'll never want to see me again. That's the one part that doesn't bear thinking about. I don't suppose you'll believe I care a hang for you now, but I do, even though it's too late to go on living with you if I wanted to. The other thing was stronger, that's all. I had a little Persian cat once. I used to let her out for exercise on a string because I was afraid of losing her. But she got out when I wasn't looking all the same and disappeared for three days. She couldn't help it, poor dear. It was just her nature. I expect I'm like that cat. I was bound to go on the tiles. You'll think that vulgar. I am vulgar all through. That's the difference between us.

"You've been the best chum in the world, dear. I can't thank you properly. I'm a rotter. I've left my cash on the dressing-table. I don't want it. Fred Woolf will be looking after me. Take it, do please. What's the use of starving when you needn't. Good-by, Lexie. You may not believe it, but I'm crying and I *do* care.

"MAGGY."

XI

Mrs. Bell came into the room with the supper tray. It was mostly tray. The supper consisted of two cups of cocoa, half a loaf of bread and an atom of butter. She gave her lodger an inquisitive glance as she spread the tablecloth. Alexandra had Maggy's letter in her hand, and her face was woefully sad.

"You need not lay for two," she said quietly. "Miss Delamere won't be here in future."

The bald statement was sufficient for Mrs. Bell. Ever since the day when Maggy had been brought to her door in a private car she had more or less been prepared for this dénouement. The association of chorus-girls and cars in her experience had but one meaning: a rise for the former in the plane of life with a concomitant and much-to-be-desired acceleration of the pace at which it may be lived.

"I'm glad she's found a friend," she observed cheerfully. "She's the sort that's made for a man to look at. Have you seen her chap yet, Miss Hersey?"

"I don't want to talk about Miss Delamere's affairs," winced Alexandra.

"You're upset, I can see. I'm not denying it's hard to see a friend carried off like that." Mrs. Bell Bell shook her head deprecatingly. "It's a trying place, the stage. I wouldn't go back to it myself, not if I was paid like a Pavlova. I'd rather toil and moil for Mr. Bell downstairs all the days of my life." And having thus asserted her claim to respectability, conjugal endurance and a taste for sour grapes, with admirable conciseness she felt she was privileged to ask another question: "Have you got a shop yet, dear?"

"No, it's the wrong time of year."

"You can't wait till the autumn?"

"No."

"Then what'll you do?"

"I'm not thinking of myself just now. It doesn't matter," said Alexandra wearily.

"I know. You're bothering your poor head about Miss Delamere. Don't you fret. She's got some one to look after her. That's better than looking after yourself. I daresay she's sleeping in a creep de sheeny nightdress to-night with real lace on her pillows."

"Don't talk like that!" Alexandra shuddered.

"Well, it's no good trying to walk clean on a muddy road. Drink your cocoa while it's hot, dearie. If you're on the stage you must go on like the angels in heaven, doing what Rome does, where there's very little marriage or giving in marriage." Mrs. Bell's metaphor was mixed, but her views were definite. "That's why I would rather see my own girl lying here at my feet dead and smiling in her coffin than in the profession. She's a respectable upper housemaid," she finished comfortably, as she closed the door behind her.

Alexandra tried to eat a little dry bread. The butter was rancid. She ended by giving up the attempt. Her throat ached. She leant her head on the table. It ached as much as her heart and throat did. Her whole body was permeated with the pain of unshed tears.

Maggy had gone.

Except for the letter, which was final enough, it was difficult to realize. She had not even taken her box, only a small handbag. Her possessions had been so pitifully meager. Her wooden-backed brush and a metal comb were still on the dressing-table, but the cheap German silver powder box and her rouge and cream pots were gone; there was the nightdress case on her bed in the crochet work that was Maggy's hobby with the big badly-worked M in washed-out greens and pinks. Wrapped in a little screw of paper was the money she had left behind. She had taken Alexandra's photograph, and for some reason she had turned the face of her own to the wall.

A wild desire came to Alexandra to run out, late as it was, go to Maggy and

bring her back. Then she remembered that she did not even know where Maggy was. She was gone and that was all; swallowed up in the immensity of London; captured by some man unknown.

The realization that Maggy had deliberately stolen away at the call of exigency hurt her acutely. Passion had never touched Alexandra. Just now she could only feel impatience with one who was moved by it to extremes. But mingled with the distaste for a thing she could not comprehend was compassion for her friend. Some part of Maggy must be suffering, sorry. No woman surrenders herself without some secret, sacred regret.

She sat thinking, trying not to think, for hours. Finally, she undressed and, in the darkness, said her prayers. She felt they were futile, childish.... She turned her face to the wall so that she should not see the ghostly outline of Maggy's narrow, empty bed.

As the hours passed and sleep did not come she began to wonder if it were not all a dream. The idea took hold of her. Of course, Maggy had not gone....

She sat up and spoke her name across the darkness.

"Maggy!"

Although there was no answer, the tantalizing obsession was still upon her. She got out of bed and crossed over to Maggy's, feeling above the coverlet for the comforting touch of the warm, sleepy body. The coverlet was flat, the sheets cool. Maggy had gone.

She groped her way back to her own bed, and at last tears came, and with tears, sleep.

By the morning, the sharp edge of her feelings was somewhat blunted. She was still sorry, but not passionately sorry. Those who have wept for their dead with the poignancy of first grief experience much the same dulling of the emotions. It precedes the inevitable resignation, without which they could not again take up the lonely burden of life.

Maggy was lost to her, as lost to her as if she had died. She had not the consolation of knowing that she would see her again, alive, exuberantly happy, unregretting, and that this feeling would pass. She did not know then that across the barrier of her frailty Maggy would hold out her strong, young, eager hands, and that she, Alexandra, would grasp them in unalterable love and friendship.

She put away the money Maggy had wanted her to take until she could give it back to her, and directly she had had her breakfast, started for the theatrical agents' offices. They opened at ten. She had small hope of obtaining anything at any of them. The principals did not know her by sight. When one of them made an occasional dart into the waiting room and gave a quick glance round she was only "one of a crowd."

At such times there would be a little stir and scrimmage amongst the men

and women in which she would not share. Men would elbow women, women elbow men in their efforts to catch the agent's eye or better still his sleeve. And he would shake them off in a precipitate passage from his own room to that of his partner's at the other end of the waiting room. Alexandra knew his short, little, staccato, stock sentences by heart.

"Nothing for you to-day, dear." (Shake her off.)

"Sorry, my dear, I can't stop." (Shake her off.)

"No, my dear, I—oh, it's you. Stop behind. I'll see you later." (Pressure of the hand.)

"Nothing in your line to-day, old fellow." (Shake him off.)

Perhaps a fleeting look at Alexandra, so that she was in doubt as to whether she had been noticed or not.

Then the crowd would wait on, lessened by the few who lost heart and went on to other agencies. The assembly varied little in any of these refuges of the out-of-works. There you would find every specimen of stageland: the sprightly young man with an eye stimulated hopefully by sherry from the adjacent Bodega, dressed in the last fashionable suit left from his wardrobe, his waistcoat pocket bulging with pawntickets; the old actor with a blue chin, a red nose and a kindly smile, unctuously imparting the latest "wheeze" to a brother comedy-merchant; the hard-eyed woman of forty, rouged, smelling of spirits and patchouli, consumed with inward wrath because of the refusal of managers to entertain her applications for youthful parts; the fresh-looking girl with an air of country lanes and a pigtail, who nevertheless was bred and born at Stratford-at-Bow; the seedy advance-agent, vainly trying to adopt a managerial air; the plump and cheery chorister with no ambitions beyond thirty shillings a week and a long pantomime run; her male compeer nourishing a secret belief that he could "wipe the floor" with every tenor on the boards.

Eleven, twelve, one o'clock, and still the patient crowd would linger on in the agents' offices, chattering intermittently, giggling occasionally, desperately anxious all the same, eyes ever glancing toward the two shut doors.

At one would come the unwelcome news, spoken by the young man who kept the accounts and made out the contracts:

"Mr. Whitehead's gone to lunch. Won't be back to-day. No use waiting."

How quickly the room emptied! Alexandra did not know that a goodly proportion of its habitués would quickly foregather for consultation and refreshment in Rule's or the Bodega, where the atmosphere was redolent of alcoholic odors, curiously aromatic, sonorous with sustained conversation and the low chuckle of the comedians.

One saw the same faces again after the luncheon hour, at Denton's, at Hart's, at Paul Stannard's, a little less hopeful, a little more tired as the day went

on.

Paul Stannard had got Alexandra her engagement at De Freyne's. She went to him again now. She liked him. He was a gentleman by birth, had drifted on to the stage, loathed it, could not get free of it, and ended by running a theatrical agency with fair success. He did not call all girls "dear," only the ones that liked it, and was more accessible to the rank and file than most agents.

"I thought I had fixed you up with De Freyne," he said. "His show's in for a long run. Couldn't stick it?"

"Mr. De Freyne told me to go."

Alexandra was tired. She could hardly stand.

"Sit down," invited Stannard. "Up against it?"

"Well, I've nothing to do. It's serious."

"I'm sorry." He turned over the leaves of a big book on his desk. "And I can't help you. Nothing's doing, except a sextette for Rio."

"Can't I go?" she asked eagerly.

"My God, no!"

He put his hands in his pockets and surveyed her compassionately. Belonging as he did to the class that shelters its women it still hurt him to see women engaged in fighting for bread. It was more desperate still when they fought for honor too, or held it above the price of bread.

"Why did you send me to the Pall Mall if you knew they wouldn't want—any one straight-laced?"

"I can't ask every girl who comes to me for a job to sign an affidavit concerning her morals. Why are you on the stage at all if you've got different ideas to the others? You haven't an earthly. Might as well buy a toothbrush."

"Buy a toothbrush?"

"To sweep out an Augean stable." He scribbled some addresses on a half sheet of paper. "There's just a chance these aren't filled up. Mention my name. I don't hold out any hope, though." He hesitated for a minute. "Are you bound to go on at this? Haven't you a home to go to?"

"I'm bound to go on," she said, trying to keep the desperate note out of her voice.

"Well, good luck." Stannard held open the door for her.

"Poor devil!" he said as he shut it.

All the names which Stannard had given her were those of minor managers. It was late in the season and their companies would in all probability be made up and booked for the road. Still she went to them. There was a bare chance that one of them might have a vacancy. For two hours she hung about their offices waiting for an interview, only to waste her time in the end. "Full up" was the answer she got to each application. The last place she called at was situated in a block of buildings off Shaftesbury Avenue. As she left it a door facing her on the opposite side of the passage opened and a man in a frock coat and silk hat came out. He stopped short, looked her up and down and spoke.

"Excuse me, but are you out of an engagement?"

"Yes," she replied, a last glimmer of hope flickering within her, the silk hat suggesting something managerial.

The stranger's next words confirmed her in this idea.

"I believe you're the very person I've been looking for for a week. The question is, can you sing?"

"Yes."

"Then come in."

He threw the door open again and followed her in. The room contained two chairs, a desk, a small grand piano, one or two playbills on the walls and several diagrams of the larynx, looking not unlike a map of the tube railways.

"This is my practise room and therefore bare," he explained. "It's bad to sing in a room blocked up with furniture. Breaks up the voice, you know. By the way, my name's Norburton—Gerald Norburton. You may have heard of it," he added modestly.

Alexandra had heard of it. The name was that of a singer of some repute.

"Oh, then, you're not an agent," she said, a little disappointed.

"Lord, no." The idea seemed to amuse him. "Fact of the matter is this: my friend, Maurice Haines, wrote to me the other day—here's his letter—asking me to find him a likely girl for a sketch he has booked at the Palace. He'd engaged some one, but she's just gone in for appendicitis. Funny thing, appendicitis. Has it ever occurred to you—" The blank look in Alexandra's face constrained him to keep to business. "So he appeals to me, thinking that as a singer I might know some one likely. But I didn't—not until I saw you. If you can sing it's a sure thing." He read from the letter he had been searching for.

"She must be tall and dark and a lady. Youth essential. Of course she must have a well-trained voice, but previous experience doesn't matter. I'll look in next week, and if you know a girl who will do, for heaven's sake have her round. The sketch is booked for the next six months, first here and then in the leading provincial towns. I'll pay ten pounds a week for the right woman."

"What do you think of that?"

"It seems to me it depends on my voice," said Alexandra.

"That's it. Do you mind singing me something? Here's a pile of songs. Pick out one you know."

She found a song. Norburton played the accompaniment. She had an idea she was singing well and hoped he would think so. When she finished, she had the impression that he was not satisfied.

"I'm afraid you're disappointed," she said, with foreboding.

"No, not exactly. You've a nice voice. You want to know how to pitch it better. As it is it won't carry. I believe I could teach you in five days, before Haines comes round."

"I couldn't expect you to do that."

"But I *do* teach," he laughed. "Do you doubt my capability? I assure you that besides being a public singer I get three guineas for every half-hour lesson I give."

"What I meant was," said Alexandra, "that I couldn't expect you to coach me for nothing, and I couldn't pay enough to make it worth your while."

He appeared to think.

"I want to do my best for Haines," he said. "Look here. I'll give you five lessons—one every day for ten minutes—and you can pay me what you can afford, five shillings a lesson, say."

She colored. "That's charity."

"No. I really want to help Haines."

Now Alexandra had little more than five shillings in her purse. The next quarterly payment of her annuity would not be due for a fortnight. In the meantime all she possessed was some old jewelry that had belonged to her mother. There was the money Maggy had left behind her, but she was not going to touch that.

"I should like you to teach me. It's very good of you," she said. "Would you take this instead of money? It's worth a little more than five five-shilling lessons." She tendered him a ring with a single pearl in an antique setting. A pawnbroker would have lent her five pounds on it. She was anxious that he should take the ring. It would make her feel less under an obligation to him.

Apparently he appreciated her feelings.

"That's very pretty of you," he said. "It fits my little finger, too. Would you rather I took it?" There was a shade of reluctance in his voice.

"Much rather."

"Well, thank you very much. Now I must pull you through by a little teaching. Can you have your first lesson now? No time like the present, is there? Stand in the corner over there to the right. Now, sing 'ah' on middle C. Keep your tongue well down. Give it room—give it room! Swell it out! You'll do very

well," he said, after ten minutes. "To-morrow, same time. I'll drop Haines a line. Don't thank me, please."

Another girl came in as Alexandra went out. She heard Norburton tell her she was early.

"Have you heard from Mr. ——" She thought the name mentioned was Haines, but argued she must have been mistaken. The girl was fair and short, not at all the type Norburton's friend wanted. Alexandra assumed she must be one of the singer's private pupils, and thought no more about her.

For the next four days she came for her lessons, and at the end of that time Norburton told her he was quite satisfied with the result.

"Haines will be here to-morrow at eleven," he told her. "Don't worry, you'll get the engagement."

All the same she did worry. She pinned her hopes on it. She had curtailed her food down to the irreducible minimum. Privation showed in her looks. She was not a big eater, but her physique demanded good and nourishing food, which now she never got. She wanted new shoes and gloves badly. These she could not manage to do without indefinitely. She began to lose confidence in herself in these days. She knew her appearance was noticeably shabby, and that she was getting the delicate look that employers dislike. One cannot say to the man from whom one is hoping for an engagement: "I'm pale, but I'll look better when I can afford to feed myself properly. My clothes are shabby, but they would be in rags if I hadn't looked after them as if they were priceless brocades. And I'm not poor and hungry and out of an engagement because I've no talent, but because I've certain principles that I've brought to the wrong place. Give me a chance and don't ask anything else of me."

At five minutes to eleven the next day she was in Shaftesbury Avenue. Outside Mr. Norburton's door some ten or twelve girls were waiting. They looked a mixed lot, all of them anxious, poor and shabby.

"He told me ten," said one of them, "and he's not here yet."

"I've been here since half-past nine," said another.

One bold spirit rapped sharply on the door.

As a result one next to it bearing a brass plate and a solicitor's name was opened and a man put his head out and angrily demanded:

"Who's making that row? If you're waiting to see the fellow who had that room, he's gone. Went away yesterday afternoon."

"Meaning Mr. Norburton?" asked one of the girls.

"I don't know what his name was. He's gone, anyhow. It's no good waiting about and making a noise."

He shut the door. The girls stared at one another blankly.

"I want to know the meaning of this," said one of them truculently. "P'raps

the caretaker can tell us." She clattered down the stone stairs, and half a dozen of the others followed her.

A fair girl standing next to Alexandra spoke to her.

"Did you want to see Mr. Norburton too?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid I shan't." Alexandra felt faint.

"I don't think we shall either. It's my belief we've been done. Did he give you lessons?"

"Five."

"I had five, too," nodded the girl. "Two pounds I paid the blighter. He said I'd suit Mr. Haines a treat. Read me a letter saying he wanted a fair girl with a good figure and contralto voice— What's that? It was a 'tall and dark' to you! My hat! What did *you* pay?"

"I gave him a pearl ring."

"O-oh!" Her eyes went round. "I saw it on his finger. Then you were hard up?"

"I had the ring, but not the money to pay him."

"And I had the money. And I haven't got it now."

One of the girls who had gone to make enquiries below came up again.

"Thought I'd come and tell you," she panted. "It's true. He's gone, right enough. The piano was hired and it's been fetched away. He's done seventeen of us, the beast! His name isn't Norburton at all, but Easton or Weston, I forget which. If the real Mr. Norburton or Maurice Haines heard what he'd been up to they'd prosecute him. He's just been using their names to cod us. Oh, I'd like to—to—" The unspoken threat tailed off in a resigned sigh. "Well, there's a voice-trial at Daly's at 11.30. I'm off."

Alexandra did not move. She was dazed. The other girls melted away, all but one little creature in black who commenced to sob.

"Don't cry," said Alexandra, touched by her grief. "You must try and forget the disappointment."

The girl raised streaming eyes. She was very plain and wore her hair frizzed out all round her head. The fingers through which her tears had been trickling were red and work-worn.

"I paid him f-four pounds in gold," she wept. "And he s-said my voice was g-good enough to get me the engagement. And I've given notice at the place I'm at on the strength of it, and now I'll have to go back and ask to be kept on. Makes me ashamed of myself, it does, after what I said to the mistress about gettin' ten pounds a week on the stage. And now f-four pounds of good money gone!"

"Haven't you any left?"

"I've got eleven saved, but it would have been fifteen," sniffed the girl. She took it hardly that she had to pay so heavily for her experience.

"Well, then, cheer up," said Alexandra. "I haven't got fifteen shillings."

"Not in the world?"

"Not in the world."

"But you're a lady!"

"Am I?" asked poor Alexandra. Tears were not far from her own eyes now. The girl saw them, and the fount of her own dried up in her compassion for a disappointment that must be even greater than her own because of the actual need behind it. A lady, and with less than fifteen shillings in the world! Why, she had always been able to earn nearly ten shillings a week, without counting her board and keep. She had always been able to count on regular employment, plenty of food and a fairly comfortable bed; and until she had been dazzled by the magnificent prospect of ten pounds a week and still more by the idea of becoming a "star actress," she had been fairly contented with her life. She wished she had never seen that catch advertisement in the newspaper.

"I shouldn't think any more about the stage if I were you," advised Alexandra.

"I shan't," was the resolute answer. "It's no good, is it?"

"Not a bit of good."

The girl hesitated.

"Do you mind telling me," she said, "if it's very bad. The girls on it, I mean."

"It's difficult sometimes for them to be good," was Alexandra's qualified reply.

"That's pretty much what our milkman says. He had a wife he divorced that used to go on the stage once a year in pantomime."

Alexandra smiled wanly. She was getting accustomed to the democratic atmosphere of the stage, where social differences are in-existent. The dragging in of the milkman's wife was only a sharp-cut illustration of the lengths to which the leveling-down process could go. The life had robbed her of all surprise at the necessity of having to rub shoulders with ex-shopgirls and the like; but this was the first time she had found herself on terms of equality with a domestic servant.

"Dessay I'm well out of it," said the girl philosophically. "I hope you'll get on, miss."

As she passed Alexandra she stopped, making believe to pick up something that was not there.

"Oh, look what you've dropped!" she exclaimed, holding out two half-crowns.

Alexandra had come out that morning with only a few pence.

"It isn't mine," she disclaimed. "If you look in your purse you'll probably find it's your own money."

The girl made a pretense of doing so.

"No, that it isn't," she insisted. "It must be yours, right enough."

"But it can't be."

Before she could anticipate the movement, the girl slipped past her and raced down the stairs. Alexandra followed as fast as she could. But the girl was too quick for her. She was nowhere to be seen when Alexandra reached the street.

Only then did she comprehend the meaning of the generous subterfuge. She stood staring down at the money in her hand—two half-crowns, given her by a servant!

XIII

July, that theatrical close season, was wearing itself out. Alexandra subsisted on the small quarterly dividend that a grateful country bestows in the way of pension on the orphaned children of the men who fight its battles. She sweltered in her one room or else sat in the deserted ones of theatrical agencies waiting for an engagement that never came.

One sultry afternoon, on turning into Sidey Street, she found, standing opposite her door, a brand-new landaulette. In her prosperous days she had learnt to distinguish between the makes of cars, and a glance showed her that this one belonged to a type that was just then being widely advertised at a popular price. But it was neither its shape nor finish, nor even the bright coloring of its paint-work that attracted her attention so much as the large monogram composed of an M. and a D. in the center of its door-panel. The world might contain a thousand other people with those initials, but M. D. on an empty car outside Alexandra's door meant that Maggy was inside the house, waiting for her.

Her heart beat fast and she went in. There would be a visible difference in Maggy. Their girlish friendship was a closed chapter. Maggy had left her. The hurt still rankled. She felt nervous. It would be like greeting a stranger; worse, it would be meeting as a stranger one with whom she had shared a close intimacy. There would be awkwardness....

Maggy, waiting for her, felt equally nervous. She had struggled against the desire to see Alexandra again, but it had grown too strong for her. She yearned for her. She wanted to tell her that she had not deserted her, that she could still be as true a friend as ever. Suppose Alexandra were so intolerant of what she had done that she would not even let her stay a minute! Perhaps she would refuse

to speak, or worse still, and this was more likely, she might pretend hard that her feelings had not changed so that she, Maggy, might not feel hurt, and Maggy would know she was pretending. She began to wish she had not come.

Looking round the little room it seemed difficult to believe that she had really left it. Only the expensive frock she was wearing, a peep through the curtains at the new toy that she liked to drive about in, assured her that she had. Then she noticed that her bed was gone. That was even more conclusive evidence of the domestic rupture than the expensive frock and the car. And yet Alexandra had her photograph on the mantel-piece. That cheered her.

During one of her periodical peeps at the window she saw Alexandra walking down the street. A panicky feeling assailed her. She peeped again and noticed how slowly she was coming along, how listless was her step. She looked tired, frail. Maggy's warm heart gave a compassionate thump. Her nervousness increased as she heard Alexandra mounting the stairs. What should she say to start with? "I was passing, and I thought I'd look in?" That would sound casual, forced. Or "I hope you don't mind my coming to see you." That would be groveling. Should she wait for Alexandra to speak first? Suppose she should say something cold and cutting, final? Suppose she just stood still, waiting for Maggy to speak? And how long might they not stand looking at each other like that, without saying a word....

Alexandra opened the door and Maggy faced round, her breast rising and falling.

Unrehearsed words bubbled from her heart.

"Oh, Lexie, I'm just the same. Won't you be?"

"Maggy, dear!"

Choking with emotion and gladness, they found they were holding hands tightly, as if they could never let go. Big tears welled up in Maggy's eyes.

"It doesn't alter one a bit," she got out huskily.

They sat down on the bed, close together, for a moment or two dumb with congestion of thought—the numberless things, essentials affecting themselves, that needed asking and answering.

"Are you happy, Maggy?"

"Don't I look it?" She irradiated happiness. Her eyes beamed, her lips laughed. "I love him, Lexie. It's lovely to love a man whatever way love comes to you. He can't give me the brown egg at breakfast because he's not there then, but I feel just as—oh, you know! I'm not really *bad*, Lexie. There isn't another man in the world for me. Tell me about yourself, darling. Have you got anything to do yet?"

"No. I'm beginning to wonder whether I ever shall. I can't see anything ahead. It's black."

"Your stomach's empty," said Maggy prosaically. "You look as if you've lived on nothing for ten days."

"I've lived on four-and-sixpence a week."

"Oh, Lexie! And I've had caviare and plovers' eggs and all sorts of expensive things while you've been starving!" She looked horribly contrite. "Do you know that picture advertisement with a big fat cat talking to a thin miserable one and saying it had been fed on somebody's milk? I'm the fat cat because I'm being kept by—"

"Don't!" said Alexandra.

"I'm sorry. I forgot. Fred encourages me to be downright. Don't take the pins out of your hat. Look here, Lexie. Do me a favor and come out with me sometimes. Come now! When Fred's not around I'm at a loose end, and it's lonely. I get tired of mooching round the shops and only buying things for myself. The day would go faster if I could lie in bed half the morning, but I'm so beastly energetic. I'm awake at seven and thinking of eggs and bacon. I would like to show you my flat. Would you mind coming to see it? There's no one there, only me."

She saw Alexandra hesitate.

"It's such a duck of a flat," she went on. "I haven't got any one to show it to. Dozens of times I've said to myself: if only Lexie could see this or that.... You needn't approve of me, but do come! We can have an early dinner before I go to the theater."

"But what about—"

"Fred's never there at that time. We generally lunch out and then I don't see him till after the show."

On Maggy's left hand Alexandra noticed the gleam of a wedding ring. Maggy, following her glance, smiled contentedly. For the moment it occurred to Alexandra that perhaps Maggy was really married after all. She asked the question.

"No," was the regretful reply. "But I often forget I'm not. There's not much difference when you're fond of a man. You get to love him so much that you don't feel the law could bring you any closer. All the same I'd like to be married to him really. I'd like to look after his clothes, and keep his things tidy—and have his children." She flushed and got up rather hurriedly. "Ready? Come along!"

In the narrow hall they encountered Mrs. Bell. She had been lying in wait, and now advanced with her be-ringed and not over-clean hand outstretched.

"Always pleased to see you, Miss Delamere," she beamed. "I'm sure Miss Hersey's been quite lost without you. No chance of your coming back to us, I suppose?" She smiled knowingly.

"You never know," said Maggy lightly. "Here's something to—buy shrimps

with," she supplemented, winking at Alexandra.

Mrs. Bell gave an astonished and delighted look at the coin before her fingers closed on it.

"Well, you are a dear! I always did say you had a heart of gold—"

"Not when my purse had only coppers in it," Maggy laughed.

"What did you give her? She looked quite surprised," Alexandra inquired directly the street door had shut.

"A sovereign."

"But why?"

"Swank, my dear. Get in."

The car moved off.

"How do you like it?" she asked. "It's a Primus. Fred's got an interest in them. I wish he'd make me an agent. He's had my photo taken in one for an ad. They've got electric starting and lighting and only cost two-seventy-five. Lean back, dear. Isn't it comfy? Oh, I wonder what you'll think of my flat. You'll like the bathroom, I know. Hot water service at any time of the day or night. That's in the prospectus."

Alexandra laughed.

"May I have a bath?"

"Of course. Whenever you like. I thought you'd ask."

She could not contain her pride in her new home. Alexandra, unable to help contrasting it with her own poor room, liked its light daintiness, its exquisite tidiness. Maggy would have delighted in doing the whole work of a cottage of her own in the country. She was by nature domesticated. The personal touch was everywhere visible about the flat, especially to Alexandra who knew her. Maggy had a mania for crochet work. It was to be seen in all directions. Towels, mats, chair covers, everything that could have crochet sewn on to it was so ornamented. A large open workbox, crammed to overflowing with a medley of fancy-work, testified to the hours she gave to her needle and the many directions in which she made use of it. A mongrel terrier gave them a violent welcome as they came in, and a dissipated-looking cat blinked at them lazily from the sofa where it lay on a cushion. Maggy introduced the two animals.

"This is Mr. Onions," she said. "I saw him eating one out of a dustbin and brought him here. He was starved, Lexie. Now he lives on the fat of the land, like me. And he's no breed, like me. Neither is Mrs. Slightly. She's Slightly because she's slightly soiled, and never will clean herself, and she's called 'Mrs.' because she's not married, but ought to be. Isn't it curious, Lexie? Slightly and Onions are absolute gutter-snipes, but they've taken to cushions and cream as if they'd never known anything else. Fred can't bear them. He wanted me to have a Pekinese with a pedigree, but *I* haven't a pedigree, so I don't want an animal

with one. Slightly and Onions are such grateful devils, too. Would you really like a bath now? After you've had it we'll have tea. China tea at four and six a pound, my dear! Think of that! I believe I could drink tea dust and enjoy it if I knew it was expensive."

While Alexandra luxuriated in her bath, reckless for once of the quantity of water she used, Maggy took the opportunity of providing something exceptional in the way of tea. It began with poached eggs and finished with strawberries and cream. Maggy was not a bit hungry; she had lunched late with Woolf. But she knew Alexandra had been denying herself food and would eat heartily so long as she could do so in company. So she crammed loyally, ignoring the physical discomfort it inflicted on her.

Finally she put Alexandra into the most comfortable of her chairs and drew another close to it. Onions lay at her feet, Slightly was curled on her lap.

"Now tell me what you've been doing to get an engagement," she said.

"There's nothing to tell. No luck anywhere, that's all."

Maggy sighed. "I wish you could live here. That's impossible, I know. But why be so proud? Let me lend you a few pounds."

"I can't. I've not used the money you left. I meant to give it back to you, but I forgot."

"You make me angry. Isn't my money good enough? I'm sorry, Lexie. You've got such cracked ideas."

Alexandra decided to be frank.

"It isn't that," she said. "I would take your money if I dared and be grateful for it. I would sooner borrow from you than from any one. But if I began to borrow, even from you, I should find it more difficult to keep straight. I've never said as much to anybody before, but I don't want you to think I won't take it because it's you who are offering it."

"I think I know what you mean. Once you've taken the first step you're afraid you'll go on slithering. But you've got to take some sort of step to get a job. De Freyne said we were shabby, Lexie; but if he could see you now! What's the use of being nearly the same size as your best friend if you won't let her lend you a dress or two? Answer me that. That's not borrowing. That oughtn't to hurt your pride. We used to swop things. And I've got a dress and a hat, and a pair of shoes in the other room that are too small for me. You must have them, Lexie. No one'll look at you as you are. When managers see a girl looking shabby they only think of the reputation of their stage-door. If you'll just let me give you a leg-up toward a job! Let me drive you round to the agencies in the car instead of walking. I won't take 'no.' It's Maggy's call this time."

She prevailed in the end, forced the new frock on Alexandra and the shoes that were too small; stuffed other things into the parcel when she wasn't

looking—a veil and some gloves, a pot of Bovril from her sideboard, a tin of biscuits, a bottle of scent and other things. Alexandra found them all when she got home. They dropped out of the most unexpected places. There was a box of chocolates in one sleeve, some very nice soap in another. A silk petticoat was wrapped round a bottle of lemon squash. It was so like Maggy's indiscriminate largesse. Where she loved, she was constrained to give, always with both hands. Before Alexandra left she showed her a photograph.

"Fred," she said. "Isn't he handsome? He's got one white tuft in his black hair. I wish you knew him, Lexie." Alexandra had all along been afraid she was going to say that. "I wish you *would* meet him." Her voice was wistful. "I'm so proud of you. I've talked about you to him such a lot. I believe if he were to see you he'd—think more of me," she added humbly.

"Doesn't he think a lot of you?" asked Alexandra, surprised. She put down the photo. The face, handsome, albeit brutal, did not appeal to her.

"In a way. But I don't think he really believes you're a lady ... that a lady would be real friends with me. It's difficult to explain."

Alexandra felt sure she would not like Woolf. She instantly resented what she suspected must be his attitude toward Maggy.

"You'd be doing me a favor," Maggy said. "Would you mind very much?"

Alexandra shrank from meeting Woolf because instinctively she guessed the kind of man he was. The photograph almost told her. It showed her a man, not a gentleman, yet whose money bought him the right of way amongst gentlemen, the type of man who would assume that every woman, not a lady, had her price. She felt sorry for Maggy.

"I will meet him if you're very keen about it," she said at length. It seemed so grudging, so ungrateful to refuse the one thing required of her. Maggy would have done, had done, more than that for her. She acknowledged the concession now with a spontaneous hug.

"I'll fix a day. We'll have lunch together," she said. "It makes me so happy, Lexie, to think I've got you again—my friend. Men say women can't be friends. They don't know. Have another look round before you go. You do think it nice, don't you? Fred's taken it on a three years' agreement."

"Is he married?" asked Alexandra suddenly.

"No."

"Then surely he might marry you."

"He would never marry me," said Maggy. "I don't talk about it. I don't think of it. If he thought I'd got such an idea in my head I don't believe he'd want me any longer. He'd hate to be tied down to anything or anybody for longer than a three years' agreement."

An oppression fell on Alexandra. The room, which had been flooded by

the afternoon sun, was in shade now. It looked colder, less intimate. One saw that it was a room whose furniture had been provided *en bloc* by a Company—the Company that owned the flats. There was no individual taste about it. There was nothing permanent about it. It was not a home, and was not meant to be one.

“But after three years—” Alexandra began anxiously.

Maggy shut her eyes.

“If you ever love a man,” she said, “you’ll know one doesn’t think in years. One simply feels—in minutes.”

XIV

Alexandra did not have to avail herself of Maggy’s offer of her car for the purpose of visiting the various agencies. That evening she received a post-card from Stannard requesting her to call on Mrs. Hugh Lambert at her house in South Kensington. Mrs. Lambert’s name was familiar to her as that of the wife of a leading actor-manager on whose stage she was never seen. She toured the provinces with plays of her own, while he remained in London or visited New York, in both of which cities he was the idol of a vast number of impressionable women.

You could hardly pick up an illustrated paper without finding Hugh Lambert’s photograph in it. You could buy picture post-cards of him at every shop where such things are on sale—full-face, in profile, in costume, out of costume, head and shoulders, half-length, full-length. How he was able to devote so much time to being photographed and yet get a reasonable amount of sleep was a mystery that did not seem capable of explanation. He was immensely popular and very good-looking in an effeminate way. Before arriving at the dignity of actor-management his talent for poetic interpretation had been freely recognized. But success had spoiled him. Now he was mannered. Costume parts were his hobby. The story went that, at one of his dress-rehearsals in which he was figuring as a Roman general in gilded armor, he asked a lady present what she thought of his appearance, and that her answer had been: “Oh, Mr. Lambert, what a girl you are for clothes!”

As Lambert’s reputation had increased, so that of his wife had diminished. At one time she had promised to develop into an actress of renown. But for some reason difficult to understand she never quite succeeded. The critics said she

lacked "personal magnetism," that touch of attractiveness that gets the actress's individuality across the footlights. The fact remains that she failed to please the public in the big roles that fell to her in her husband's productions. London dropped her, and Hugh Lambert's name blazed alone in colored electric lights across the front of his theater.

Then came a whisper of his marital infidelity. The couple separated. From this time onwards Mrs. Lambert was seldom seen on the London stage.

Her career was a disappointing one. None knew it better than herself. Technically and emotionally she was a finer actress than her husband's leading lady, finer indeed than most of the leading ladies of other managers. That she became a great attraction in the Provinces was nothing to her. She loathed the Provinces, their inadequate theaters, their inferior hotels, and the incessant traveling. At thirty-five she found herself as it were back at the collar-work of her earlier days of struggle, and without its compensations. Then, conjugal affection and the stimulus of ambition still unachieved had made touring bearable and often enjoyable because she shared it with Lambert.

Now she was alone.

She hated the sordid manufacturing towns and their unsophisticated audiences, the eternal sameness of the self-vaunted watering-places, the dull spas where fashionable frequenters of the pump room would condescend to patronize her whom they would not pay to see in London. She was a tired woman.

To her came Alexandra at eleven o'clock on the morning appointed. She had quite forgotten, until her maid brought her up the card, that she had asked Stannard to find her a small-part actress who would also be useful as a companion. She saw Alexandra at once.

The impression the latter first got of her was a pathetic one. She never forgot it. Mrs. Lambert was sitting up in bed. The small oval of her face was too pale for health, and her dark hair accentuated her look of fragility. On the dressing-table lay a rich copper-colored transformation.

"I hope you don't mind seeing me in bed," she said. "I hate keeping people waiting. It's so selfish. In my time I've sat on dress-baskets outside dressing-room doors waiting for hours till some selfish wretch took it into his head to see me, although he'd made an appointment and knew perfectly well I was there. I vowed I'd never treat any one in the same way. Sit down somewhere and tell me about yourself. What have you done?"

"Very little," Alexandra confessed. "I'm almost an amateur."

Mrs. Lambert made a wry face. "Not a moneyed one, I hope?"

"I've got forty pounds a year."

"Officer's daughter's pension?"

"Yes." Alexandra looked surprised. "How did you know?"

"I'm one myself. Officer's daughters can't do much when they're left stranded. They teach if they're ugly and sensible enough, and they go on the stage if they're sufficiently pretty and foolish. How long have you been at it?"

"Three months."

"And how long in an engagement?"

"I rehearsed for three weeks at the Pall Mall in the chorus.... I wasn't wanted."

"I don't wonder. I can't quite see a girl like you in the Pall Mall chorus. You must have had rather an unpleasant time of it there. Were you worried by men? Before I married I used to wear a wedding ring. In my innocence, I thought it would be something of a protection, but it had quite a contrary effect." She gave Alexandra a sympathetic look. "Would you really like to come on tour with me?"

"Mr. Stannard didn't say what you required," said Alexandra. "Perhaps you won't think I'm experienced enough."

"Well, I want some one to thread ribbons through my underclothes, to sleep in my room when I see bogies, and play a small part—a servant flicking chairs. I can't promise that it will increase your theatrical reputation, but perhaps when you leave me, some minor manager might be induced to give you a decent part on the strength of your having been in Mrs. Hugh Lambert's company. You'll go about with me. I'll pay all hotel expenses and give you thirty shillings a week. If you're hard up for clothes, say so. I've always got a lot more than I want, and as I send them to the Theatrical Ladies' Guild you needn't feel under any obligation about taking them. I hope you'll decide to come. I should like you to. You won't be overworked and I'll treat you decently. I'm not a cat."

"I'd love to come if you'll have me."

"Well, we'll consider it arranged then. Stannard will see to the contract. The tour is for three months. I leave town in about a fortnight, but you might as well come and stop here in the meantime. We shall get to know each other and rub corners off. Would you care to? Then come back to-night, somewhere about six. You can help me with my shopping and packing. I'll keep you busy!" She held out a thin artistic hand.

There was no maid in the hall, so Alexandra opened the door to let herself out. A man stood on the steps, about to ring the bell. He was thirty or so, of an aristocratic type. They both hesitated for a moment. Then he asked:

"Can you tell me if Mrs. Lambert is in?"

"Yes—I think so," she said.

"Would you mind telling her I'd like to take her to lunch. I'll wait if she isn't down yet."

"Yes, certainly," said Alexandra. It struck her that he seemed to be aware of the late hours she kept. It argued intimacy. "What name shall I say?"

"Oh—Chalfont."

She went upstairs again, knocked at the door, and found Mrs. Lambert with the morning's papers on the bed. She was reading of her husband's projected departure for America with his successful repertoire. There were tears in her eyes.

"I shall have to take to glasses," she said, looking up. "I can't read without weeping. What is it?"

"Mr. Chalfont is downstairs. He wants to know if you will lunch with him."

"Please tell Lord Chalfont," said Mrs. Lambert in a low voice, "that it's the anniversary of my separation from my husband, and that I'm lunching on my heart. But he can come to dinner to-night if he likes. Ask him to put you in a taxi."

She returned to the newspapers.

XV

"Lexie's coming to lunch to-morrow," Maggy informed Woolf. "We must give her a good one, Fred, and you'll behave, won't you, D.D.?"

"D.D." in Maggy's language of love stood for Dearest Darling. She was not free from the modern, time-saving habit, set by trade advertisements and the halfpenny papers, of abbreviating words in common use down to their lowest denomination.

"So she's woken up to the fact that there may be something to be got out of you," yawned Woolf.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that, Fred. Lexie couldn't be on the make-haste. She's not made that way."

"Sounds as if she's too good and uninteresting to live."

"She isn't uninteresting. You'll like her. She's very pretty. Do be good and do me credit."

"Well ... I like that!" Woolf stared at her, half-amused.

"I mean, don't say the things you say to me. She's sensitive."

"My dear girl, don't teach me how to talk to women. Judging by what you've told me I'm inclined to think your copybook Lexie is a deep 'un. I don't think I'll come, anyway."

"Oh, but you must. I've asked her on purpose to meet you. I want her to

see what a duck you are, and to like you, and not to think me bad just because I let you wipe your shoes on me.”

She slipped to the ground and sat at his feet. Woolf liked her in her devoted moods. Like many another unworthy man, adulation gave him peculiar satisfaction. Maggy was rarely flippant now. She loved Woolf with a passion that almost frightened her. It was not a passion of the mind. He dominated her in other ways. She was too transparent to hide how much she cared. She gave too much. It was her pleasure, when she knew he was going to stay several hours with her, to take off his shoes and put on the pumps which with a few other things he kept at the flat.

She commenced to unlace his shoes now. Then she dragged his pumps from under the sofa, kissing them first before she put them on his feet.

”You funny creature. What makes you do that?” he asked, well enough aware of her reason, but desirous of extracting an expression of it.

”Because I adore you. I feel like Mary Magdalene or whoever it was who broke the precious ointment all over her Master’s feet. Oh, yes, I know who it was. But do you think she wouldn’t have done it just the same if He had been an ordinary man? He was *her* lord. She never thought of Him as everybody’s Lord. That isn’t blasphemy. It’s love.”

”You don’t know how I love you,” she went on ardently. ”Men think they know how to love, but they never love as a woman loves. I love you so much that first of all I wish I had been your mother, so that I might have held you in my arms when you were tiny and given you dill water for your tummy aches, and bathed and powdered you.... And next I wish I had been your twin sister to have grown up with you.... And next I wish I had been the first woman in your life.... And next I wish.... Oh, and I’m thankful to be—just yours.” She sat up, and went on in rather a tense voice. ”I wonder if you’ll ever get tired of me. Could you, Fred?”

”Well, I’m not yet.” He gave a playful pull at her loosened hair.

”And treat me like men treat the A.F.’s in story-books.”

”What’s an A.F.?”

”Abandoned female, you goose. That’s what I am. And when you’ve finished with me will you leave me to starve in a garret while you live in a mansion with a beautiful and good wife? And will I haunt your doorstep and throw vitriol in your belovedest face?”

”What nonsense you’re talking, Maggy.”

”It isn’t all nonsense. It isn’t only in the story-books that women do that. They do it in real life too. I read about a case in the paper not long ago, and the judge asked the girl why she did it. She answered ’Because I love him.’ The silly judge said: ’That’s a funny way of showing love,’ and there was laughter

in Court, in brackets. Laughter in Court! I expect it sounded to that girl like laughter in hell. I know what she must have felt. I daresay she lived so long with the man and loved him so much that she felt as good as his wife. Then when he left her, she must have gone mad, poor thing."

She got up and stood in front of him, looking very sweet and alluring.

"How long will you love me, I wonder?" she mused.

Woolf drew her on to his knees.

"So long as you look like you do now."

"You mean so long as I'm pretty? Wouldn't you love me if I looked like poor Mrs. Slightly? She's losing her fur."

"What's the matter with Mrs. Slightly?" he asked.

He did not care for Maggy's mongrel pets, and his tone was not encouraging. It put Maggy on her guard. She had a premonition that it would be best to hide Mrs. Slightly's secret until it could no longer be hidden.

"I'm not quite sure," she said.

"Where is she?"

"I left her in the bathroom. I'll get her. She hasn't had her supper yet."

She went out of the room. Woolf heard her calling the cat softly, then came a smothered exclamation, and she called to him eagerly, excitedly.

"Oh, Fred! Fred! Come here! Come and *look!*"

He followed her. She was standing before Mrs. Slightly's basket. The cat was purring, its eyes half-shut, tired after the tremendous function of motherhood. Six little rat-like, squirming bodies lay against her own.

"Six of them!" breathed Maggy triumphantly. "Aren't they lovely! Wasn't it worth going on the tiles for, Mrs. Dearest? The cat's cradle is full, full!"

Woolf disengaged her arm from his.

"It's disgusting," he said angrily. "You ought to have got rid of her before this, or—or kept her in. You can't keep the kittens. They'll have to be drowned."

Maggy looked at him blankly.

"Aren't you pleased?" she asked, surprised.

"Pleased! At a sight like that! Besides, you told me a lie. I won't have lies. You must have known before you went to the theater that the cat had had kittens—"

"I didn't. Oh, how dare you say so! Do you think I'd have gone out and left her all these hours without any milk by her side if I'd guessed they were coming so soon?"

She flew off, and came back with a saucer of bread and milk. She put it on the floor and went down on her hands and knees beside the newly-born animals. There was a rapt expression on her face.

"I don't think I'll stop," said Woolf huffily, and moved to the door.

He expected that she would call him back, but to his surprise she did not even look up. She was wholly absorbed with the natural phenomenon. For the first time in their intercourse she was oblivious of his presence. She did not even hear him go. She knelt entranced.

At last a sigh broke from her. She became articulate.

"Oh, you babies!" she whispered. "Oh, you little, little things!"

XVI

Maggy looked forward with immense eagerness to the luncheon at which Woolf was to meet Alexandra. She had a double reason for desiring it. In a sense, Alexandra's presence would mean that she no longer disapproved of the connection: it would give it a certain sanction, an authority it would otherwise lack. Her other reason concerned Woolf himself. In spite of his assertions to the contrary, she was sure he knew how to appreciate a woman of culture. Once he saw how different Alexandra was from the girls he usually met, his regard for herself would grow stronger, if only because she had the advantage of the friendship of such a superior being.

She was not altogether wrong in her assumption that Woolf liked a lady, although it must be admitted he seldom felt at ease with one. He was only himself with *déclassé* women, or a girl of Maggy's class, who had few sensibilities to shock. All the same, he was contemptuous of the women whose society he frequented, and he had a sneaking admiration for the women of the more sedate world to which he did not belong. It was likely that he would ultimately marry a lady, if he married at all, since he considered that women, other than the class that will not give itself away except in the bond of holy matrimony, were not worthy of any such honor. He was a cad, of course, but a cad of ambitions and brains.

Maggy's rhapsodies about Alexandra left him cold. He did not credit Maggy with being much of a judge concerning matters pertaining to the aristocracy. He did not believe that Alexandra had the breeding Maggy was always vaunting. He merely supposed that she was more subtle than Maggy, one who could ape superior manners, much as an astute parlormaid can.

The fact that this friend so exclusive, according to Maggy, should overcome her scruples sufficiently to meet him, knowing perfectly well in what relation he

stood to Maggy, was sufficient confirmation that she had never had any scruples of importance to overcome. He was amused that Maggy could be so hoodwinked by one of her own sex. But then Maggy was a little fool—pretty and taking, and that was all. He was too egregious to appreciate that real friendship for Maggy, friendship which overrode personal considerations, had induced Alexandra to accept the invitation.

She turned up at the flat at the time appointed. They were to lunch in the restaurant attached.

Woolf could not help being impressed with her appearance. He could not deny that she was really exceedingly pretty. Her features were quite perfect—white brow, small straight nose, well-shaped mouth. He saw all this at a glance, the cool, scrutinizing glance of valuation with which he favored every attractive member of her sex, whether a duchess in her carriage in Bond Street or a shop-girl on her way to work.

Maggy introduced her friend and her lover with mutual pride. The tone in which she did it left no doubt that what she would have loved to say was:

"This is Lexie. Isn't she lovely? You know she is;" and then with a certain dubiousness: "My Fred.... *Do* like him. Surely you must think him handsome."

"Delighted to meet any friend of Maggy's," said Woolf cordially. "Been a long time coming round, haven't you?"

Alexandra instantly resented the unnecessary familiarity he put into his tone, but for Maggy's sake she refrained from showing it. Woolf was no better and no worse than she had expected to find him. He was merely vulgar, from the salmon-pink handkerchief in his breast-pocket to the too-valuable pin in his tie.

"I came as soon as I was asked," she answered equably. "Maggy and I are old friends. There's no reason why I should keep away from her."

"Of course, there isn't. Only Maggy thought you didn't approve of—this little show." He waved his arm round the room.

"It's a dear little flat. I like it very much."

Woolf laughed loudly. "The flat's all right. Perhaps I should have said our little *ménage à deux*. There's no harm in it. Everybody's doing it, aren't they, Maggy? Come along to lunch, you girls."

If Alexandra could have run away then and there she would have done so. She guessed what she was in for. Maggy was looking nervous. She wanted Alexandra and Fred to "get on," to like each other. She had done her best to make her lover avoid the sort of conversation Alexandra would not like. She was dreadfully afraid he was going to spoil it all.

As Woolf led the way down to the restaurant she slipped behind and whispered:

"Lexie, don't be shocked if Fred talks a bit. I've told him not to because you

don't like it; but if he forgets—"

Alexandra gave her arm a little squeeze. It heartened her. Her adoring eyes went to the big figure, striding on in front of them.

"Doesn't he look a dear?" she asked. "Could I *help* it? Fancy him wanting me!"

Her abjectness was a revelation to Alexandra. She had not conceived it possible that cheeky, masterful Maggy, could have surrendered her independence so completely. In this man's company she was quieter, more subdued, ever watchful to please, to laugh when he laughed—a little too much perhaps, too ready to applaud his most commonplace remarks as witticisms, his untasteful jokes as gems of wit. She had a mind of her own. She hardly showed it. His assertive manhood seemed to have swamped her personality. All the time she was considering him. He scarcely considered her at all.

Conversation did not run freely during the first part of the meal. Woolf wanted to shine in Alexandra's eyes as a good host. He showed it by bullying the waiters over trivialities, until she began to feel quite uncomfortable. His was not the quietly assertive tone of the man who knows what he wants and how to order it. It was obvious to the very attendants themselves that he blustered in order to draw attention to his importance, just as he would tip excessively and yet argue over a trifling item on the bill.

Over his coffee and a cigarette his manner showed some improvement. Still, he had not taken Alexandra's measure. She was telling Maggy of her sudden luck in obtaining an engagement, and that she was going to stay with Mrs. Lambert. Maggy was delighted.

"Oh, I'm glad!" she said enthusiastically. "It's tip-top, Lexie. Fred, did you hear that? Lexie's going on tour with Mrs. Lambert. Isn't it splendid for her?"

"Splendid for Mrs. Lambert. Rather!" concurred Woolf, with heavy gallyantry. "You'll have plenty of opportunities of ingenue parts with the lady," he went on, knowingly. "You'll suit her to a T. You'll play propriety, of course! Dashed funny, that."

"I don't understand," said Alexandra.

"Oh, come, we're none of us as good as we look. Of course you've heard about Mrs. Lambert and Lord Chalfont? I told you everybody was doing it."

Her crimson face and indignant eyes did not warn him of the blunder he was committing. Maggy was playing nervously with the crystallized sugar, afraid of angering Woolf by stemming the tide of his untactful garrulity.

He bent forward, lowering his voice. "It's like this," he said, and began to give details of a liaison which Alexandra had no reason to credit, details which were offensive and unnecessary. She was genuinely shocked. Involuntarily she pushed back her chair while he was still talking and made the first excuse she

could think of.

"I shall have to be going now, Maggy. I'm so sorry. I—I'm late for an appointment as it is. I—I'll come and say good-by before I go on tour."

"Must you really go?" asked Maggy weakly. She knew that Alexandra could stand no more. It meant that her poor little attempt at concord between the only two people she cared about had come to nought. "Fred, tell the waiter to order a taxicab."

"I won't wait for that," said Alexandra. "I shall be too late. I ought to go at once. I shall find one in the street."

She managed a reassuring smile to show Maggy that though her feelings were outraged she meant to get over it, and let it make no difference to their friendship. Now that she had met Woolf and learnt the sort of man he was, nothing would have induced her to waver in allegiance to Maggy. Maggy needed her though she might never say it. She knew she could not bring herself to meet Woolf again, even for Maggy's sake.

He insisted on escorting her out of the restaurant and putting her into a cab. He was aware now from her almost monosyllabic rejoinders that he had made a mistake, spoken in bad taste. It was suddenly obvious to him that she was a lady—the "real thing," and that he had offended her. Simultaneously with this came the desire to know more of her.

"I believe you're annoyed," he said. "Have I been a bit too plain-spoken?"

"Here's my taxi," she said, disregarding the question.

He helped her in, knowing that she disapproved of him. A natural premonition told him that she would not be desirous of meeting him again unless he could convince her he was aware of his error and regretted it. He was distinctly taken with her, more now than ever that her fastidiousness made her difficult. He leant toward her and spoke almost anxiously.

"I'd like to meet you again. Can't you dine with me one night before you go? I'm sorry if I've offended you.... I made a mistake. I thought you were Maggy's sort."

The apology, so disloyal to Maggy, as well as insulting to herself, inflamed her.

"You unspeakable cad!" she said.

Woolf returned to Maggy rather red in the face. She had left the restaurant and was waiting for him in her sitting-room. She was afraid to reproach him, and yet anxious that he should know he had blundered. She was terribly disappointed.

"You shocked Lexie," she told him, and waited to see what he would say.

He made no answer.

"You thought her pretty?" she went on.

Woolf was biting his finger-nails savagely.

"Didn't you?" she persisted.

"Oh, yes. Very pretty."

He had been repulsed, snubbed, and was rankling under the smart of it. It made him turn to the girl who had nothing but devotion for him for a salve to his wounded vanity. The girl who had just gone was provokingly desirable because of her cool eyes, her scornful mouth, her aloofness, the disdain of her. But Maggy was all his, living for him.

He took her in his arms almost savagely.

"You're worth ten of her," he exclaimed; and in his irritation believed what he said.

Her body relaxed submissively in the grip of his arms.

"Oh, my God, how I love you!" she murmured, trembling.

She laid her cheek against his and stroked his hand. "Will you do me a favor, Fred?" she went on presently, unconsciously taking advantage of what she regarded as a soft mood.

"What is it? A bit more money than I give you?"

"No. I don't want more money. I've got enough. I've never been greedy that way, have I?"

"No. More silly you. Women should make hay while the sun shines."

She looked at him with soft eyes.

"When the sun shines some women only want to let it warm them through and through."

"Well, what's the favor?"

She pointed at the basket containing Mrs. Slightly and her offspring, which Woolf had not noticed.

"You asked me to have them drowned. I'd rather find homes for them. Please, D.D.?"

"But, good Lord—why?"

She drew away from him, walked over to the basket, and leant over it, as if communing with Mrs. Slightly.

"I had a dream last night," she said. "It's because of that I—I want Mrs. Slightly's kittens to live. I dreamt that I was a mother cat, only in my dream I had but one little kitty. But it was all mine and I loved it. It had soft black hair with a white tuft in it—like its father." She looked straight at the white lock that was so singular a feature of Woolf's dark hair. "And one afternoon when I had come back from a stroll I went to the basket to find that my Kitty was gone. I mewed for it everywhere. There was nowhere that I did not look. I couldn't possibly, as a cat, know that the human I looked up to, the giver of food and all good things could do anything so evil as to make away with the precious thing.

It was a nightmare. In my dream, I was searching, searching for hours. My cat-heart was breaking. When I woke up, I was mewling! Don't laugh, Fred. And I made up my mind that I couldn't have Mrs. Slightly's kittens drowned. Oh, the people who drown kittens and take away calves from cows and lambs from sheep, must be hard-hearted beasts. Why, if I had a baby, a little soft warm baby, and somebody wanted to deprive me of it—Fred!" She caught at his arm.

Startled by the sharp note of appeal in her voice he put a startled question.

Maggy had cast her arms protectively round the basket where Mrs. Slightly and her kittens slept, all unconscious of issues concerning their fate. Her shoulders were shaking. She was moved by some extraordinary emotion. But when she turned to Woolf again she was calm.

"I am quite sure," she said.

XVII

The change from the drab surroundings of the King's Cross Road to Mrs. Lambert's pretty house in South Kensington made Alexandra feel as though she had escaped from purgatory. Hers was the temperament that withers in a sad environment and expands in a bright one. Whilst in her lodgings she had had to put up with dinginess and discomfort: Albert Place was the antithesis of everything unpleasant. She seemed to breathe more freely there.

The house was small, Georgian and white. Great wire baskets overflowing with pink climbing geraniums hung from its porch and balcony. Between its green iron railings and the front door was a strip of well-kept garden full of shrubs and ferns kept fresh and glistening with a constant supply of moisture.

Inside it was equally delightful. Mrs. Lambert had a nice taste for form and color. Where Maggy would have put hot-toned plush and burnished copper the actress had quiet soft brocades and silver. Her furniture consisted mainly of delicate Georgian mahogany as decorative as it was comfortable. Alexandra reveled in it all.

Then again, the change meant relief from anxiety. She had something to do, she would be paid for it. For three months or more she would be free from continuous alarm about the morrow. Here was occupation, cleanliness, comfort, good food, agreeable companionship. Over and over again she kept reminding herself of it.

The days that followed her arrival were busy ones. The tour was to start in a fortnight. There was much shopping to do, packing, preparation for it. The small part Alexandra was to play, that of a parlormaid, did not take up much of her time rehearsing. Mrs. Lambert did not rehearse at all. Her understudy relieved her of that duty. Occasionally she would spend an hour watching her company and conferring with her manager, but so long as things went on smoothly, as they generally did, she avoided the theatrical side of her affairs as much as she could.

The fact was, as Alexandra quickly found out, Mrs. Lambert disliked the stage. She loved acting because she had a gift for it. But she was not eaten up with her own achievements and was quite free from the artificial manner and the petty interests of average stage-folk. Her chief pleasure lay in getting away from London in her excellent Panhard limousine on every available occasion and forgetting that she belonged to the stage. Alexandra shared many a pleasant drive with her that hot end of July, lunching in the shade of some quiet Surrey lane or the more deserted parts of Richmond Park.

A day or two before they were to start on tour they met Maggy in a Regent Street shop. Maggy's appearance was very striking. Her coloring just now was more vivid than usual. She bloomed.

"Oh, Lexie!" she exclaimed, "I was half afraid you'd gone off without saying good-by."

"You know I wouldn't have done that," Alexandra protested.

"I haven't given her a moment to herself," put in Mrs. Lambert. She was looking at Maggy with the frank admiration of an unjealous woman. "Are you great friends, you two?" she asked.

"We used to chum together," Maggy said. "Lexie is my patron saint."

"Well, then you must see more of her before she goes. Won't you come and lunch with us to-morrow?—seventy-four, Albert Place."

"I should love to," Maggy answered eagerly. "May I really?"

"Yes, do," said Mrs. Lambert. "Half-past one."

She nodded, and Maggy moved away to join Woolf, who had come in. He glanced curiously at Alexandra as she and Mrs. Lambert left the shop.

"That's Mrs. Lambert, with Lexie," Maggy told him. "I was just talking to them. Mrs. Lambert asked me to lunch at her house. Isn't it kind of her? She looked at me so nicely too. Our hearts seemed to shake hands."

Woolf had scarcely noticed Mrs. Lambert. He had only had eyes for Alexandra, and was incensed because she had not acknowledged him.

"Your precious particular friend cut me," he said. "I suppose you saw that."

"I'm sure she couldn't have seen you. Why should she cut you?"

Woolf had his own reasons for surmising why she had done so, but he was not going to give them.

"I should like you to drop that friendship," he said vindictively.

"Drop Lexie? Me? You're joking!"

"I'm not."

Maggy very seldom argued with Woolf. Her subjugation was nearly complete, but she still had some spirit left. She showed it now.

"I gave up living with Lexie to come to you," she reminded him.

"Do you regret it?"

"I don't, but I probably shall. Anyway, instead of turning up her nose at me she's behaved like a darling. I couldn't go back on her. Why, I—I'd rather have drowned Mrs. Slightly's kittens with my own hands than been so mean as that!"

"Well, you needn't lunch with her at Mrs. Lambert's. You might meet Lord Chalfont there."

"It's not in the least likely. But what would it matter if I did?"

"I don't like him."

"I thought you said you didn't know him?"

"I've never spoken to the bounder, if that's what you mean," said Woolf testily.

"I don't understand you. You generally don't care what I do or where I go when I'm not with you. When I see Lexie again I shall tell her you're huffy with her."

Now Alexandra had not deliberately meant to cut Woolf. She would not have done so out of consideration to Maggy; but as she had only seen his reflection in one of the shop mirrors she did not consider it necessary to turn round and bow to him. Besides, she knew he was the sort of man Mrs. Lambert would not care about, and it was quite likely that if she had acknowledged him he would have presumed on her good nature.

"What a lovely girl!" Mrs. Lambert said, when they were in the street. "She's a joy to look at. Who was the man who joined her? I seem to know his face. He looked Jewish."

"His name is Woolf."

"I wonder if he's the person who is exploiting Primus cars. He owns some racehorses too, and a sporting paper."

"It's the same," said Alexandra.

"Lord Chalfont knows more about him than I do. He had him turned out of his club. It's an exclusive one, and some thoughtless young fellow had brought him in. I don't think he's very nice, dear. What a pity he knows your friend."

Alexandra hesitated. She guessed that Mrs. Lambert had asked Maggy out of consideration to herself. But if she knew that Woolf and Maggy were intimate perhaps she would wish to rescind that invitation. Alexandra did not want to be disloyal to Maggy, nor yet to let Mrs. Lambert be deceived about her.

"Maggy thinks a lot of him," she hesitated. "I don't want to talk about her because she is my friend, but—"

Mrs. Lambert laid her hand on Alexandra's for a moment.

"The majority of us have got a 'but' in our lives," she said in a curious tone, and then added with apparent irrelevance, "Did I tell you that Lord Chalfont will be staying with us on tour?"

XVIII

Maggy meant to disregard Woolf's injunction against her going to Mrs. Lambert's. The temptation to see Alexandra was too strong to resist. Moreover, she thought it likely that he would forget having made it. Then, if she went and he still objected, she would admit having disobeyed him. She would not lie about it. She never did tell lies; not on moral grounds but because lying was cowardly and she did not know the meaning of cowardice.

Woolf had been a little overbearing with her lately, too much the master. She did not mind that sort of tyranny so long as it implied fondness, but she had a feeling that he was changing towards her. For one thing, she knew he was annoyed at her condition. That hurt her abominably. In books she had read of husbands and wives being drawn closer together, of estranged couples becoming reconciled under similar conditions. Indeed, she had hoped for special tenderness from him directly he knew they existed. She had even tried to delude herself into the hope that he might marry her.

It was not that she wanted any legal hold on him. She would not have loved Woolf any more because of marriage. But if he married her it would be a guarantee of his love, which just now she had reason to doubt. That was all. The rights which marriage confer on a woman meant nothing to her. She only wanted to get rid of the nightmare dread of separation from him. Any other girl similarly situated would have stood out for marriage, but Maggy had too much pride for that. She recoiled from a more than possible refusal.

She felt thrown back upon herself, lonely in spirit. A faintness assailed her whenever she thought of what she would have to undergo without a soul knowing of it except Woolf. And on this subject, so closely connecting them, Woolf was cold and remote. He would have shown more concern had she cut her finger. She wanted comfort. It would have helped her to confide in some

sympathetic woman. She wondered whether she dared tell Alexandra, and decided that it would not be fair or even expedient. Virginal Alexandra would not understand, or if she understood she would be more afraid than Maggy herself. Obviously she could neither reassure nor comfort her, since the thing was right out of her experience, and always would be. Poor Maggy! Her abundant vitality, her pulsing affections, made motherhood infinitely desirable to her. As a child she had scarcely had time to play with dolls because she was always on the stage, but she had always yearned over babies. Nature, which takes no account of the individual, concerned only with the reproduction of the race, had intended her to be a mother. Man-made shibboleths were to deny her that right.

She took great pains in dressing for her visit to Mrs. Lambert's. She was free from the spirit of feminine emulation, but she wanted to look her best, to please Alexandra's critical taste, so that she might remember how she looked that day, in case they might never see each other again. Maggy had never before been inclined to depression, but the clammy fingers of morbidity touched her now.

She elected to wear a frock of sprigged muslin and a simple hat that she had trimmed herself. The hat was in part a concession to Woolf, for she took pleasure in such tasks, and liked him to see that she could excel in them. Thus dressed, she was quite perfect. Her coloring was so vivid and her figure so mature that extreme simplicity suited her. But she was not quite satisfied with the effect. Her eyes roved over the dressing-table in search of some finishing touch, and came to a stop at her jewel-case. From it she took a diamond bracelet Woolf had given her, and put it on. He had bestowed it on her with great impressiveness, and she accordingly believed it to be very valuable.

When she reached Albert Place neither Mrs. Lambert nor Alexandra was in. They had been detained somewhere and had telephoned through to say so. The maid showed her into the drawing room. Somewhat to her dismay she found it occupied by a man. She did not know him by sight, but she immediately came to the conclusion that he must be Lord Chalfont. She felt awkward, uncertain whether it was "proper" to speak or not. She had not encountered any men of rank before, and had not the average chorus girl's assurance with male members of the peerage.

Lord Chalfont got up.

"I fancy we're both here for the same reason: to lunch," he said pleasantly. "Shall we become known to each other? I'm Lord Chalfont."

"My name's Delamere," rejoined Maggy.

"We both owe something to the French, then. It ought to provide us with a sort of *entente cordiale*."

"Oh, I don't believe Delamere's my right name. It's too high-falutin'. But

it's the only one I know of. My mother took it for the stage and it had to do for my christening."

The statement was made quite innocently. Chalfont was amused.

"I'm sure I've seen you before," he said.

His easy manner gave her confidence. She liked him. She felt she could talk to him without being on her guard. The way in which he looked at her had nothing disturbing in it. It was not the hunting look which she was accustomed to see in men's eyes, and against which she was for ever armed. If there was a touch of admiration in it there was also respect. She recognized the difference, and knew she had to do with a gentleman. Woolf had spoken of him as a bounder. There he was obviously wrong. Lord Chalfont looked the sort of person she had seen in historical pictures, dressed in silk and lace, walking unconcernedly to have his head chopped off.

"I daresay you've seen me often," she agreed. "I'm in the front row at the Pall Mall Theater—black chiffon over pink. Then I'm somebody's boot polish in the advertisements—my photograph, you know—cleaning my own shoes without dirtying my frock. And I'm somebody else's motorcoats, and nearly everybody's mouth-wash and cigarettes."

Chalfont laughed.

"By Jove! Do you know, I've always wondered who they got to sit for those advertisements. How's it arranged? Do you mind telling me?"

"Not at all. Sometimes the people—cigarettes or motorcoats, you know—write and ask you to come and pose for them at their shops; but generally it's done through a photographer. He gets paid for taking the photos, and you get a little cheque and a lot of advertisement. When it's for a mouth-wash you have to put on a broad grin and show your teeth. It's awfully tiring sometimes. For a hair-restorer you wear your hair down, and if you haven't much they fluff it out with a long switch so as to make people believe in the stuff."

"You're not tempted to use it, I suppose?"

"Rather not! I've got too much hair as it is. It won't even fall out in the autumn and spring."

"How about the cigarettes?"

"Oh, I daresay they're all right, though I don't suppose you'd want to smoke them."

"Just what I thought. Personally, I never buy anything that's advertised if I can help it. When I have it I invariably have a feeling that I'm being taken in."

"I think it's the women more than the men who are taken in," said Maggy thoughtfully. "Women believe anything they see in the papers. I used to once."

"But not now?"

She shook her head. "You get to know a lot about make-believe when you're

on the stage.”

”I suppose you do. How is it I’ve never met you here before?”

”I’m Lexie’s friend. I mean Miss Hersey. Excuse my bad habit of speaking of people by their Christian names. I know it’s not right. I don’t, myself, like to hear women call their husbands ’Daddy’ or ’Father’ before strangers. It always sounds to me as if they wanted you to consider yourself one of the family.”

”But you know Mrs. Lambert, don’t you?”

”Hardly. I met her with Lexie in a shop the other day and she asked me to lunch. So here I am. Have I come too early?”

”On the contrary. I’m very glad you’re here, relieving my solitude.”

”I was afraid I was boring you. I can only talk rubbish. I can’t help it. You see, I don’t know anything about the things that sensible people talk about. Pictures and books and politics.”

”I think you do yourself an injustice. Please don’t imagine I say it out of compliment, but it’s evident you are full of ideas, jolly interesting ones, too.”

”Everybody has ideas of a sort, I suppose. What I mean is, I can’t discuss any of the subjects that really matter. Religion, for instance. I know there are a thousand and one different ways of worshiping God, but I haven’t brains enough to argue about them. I’m far more interested in a thousand different patterns for crochet, or the everyday things you see from the top of a bus. I’m just hot and cold, or happy or miserable.”

”Which is it to-day?” asked Chalfont.

There was no flippancy in his tone. He saw that Maggy was an innately simple girl, quite natural, and by no means unintelligent. He found her frankness very refreshing, and he could but admire her delightful appearance. He was anything but bored.

”Which is it to-day?” he repeated.

”Warm and happy—just now. I’m not often miserable. I love my life,” she said.

She meant it. The pretty room, the flowers abounding in it, the shaded windows framing masses of pink geranium, the soft ease of the big armchair she was seated in, so different from the new-art, unadaptable chairs of her own flat, had induced in her bodily comfort and mental contentment. For the moment she had forgotten the anxieties caused by her physical state. Unconsciously too she had fallen under the charm of Chalfont’s amiability. She had never met a man like him. She felt she did not want to be on her guard with him. Whether he was more honest or more reasonable than other men she had known she did not stop to think about. Had she been asked for her chief impression of him she would have expressed it in the word clean.

So while she waited for Alexandra’s return she let her candor have full play,

keeping Chalfont amused by her cheery talk and quaintly humorous accounts of her life behind the scenes at the Pall Mall. She had brought with her a number of picture postcards of herself to give to Alexandra, for recently she had become quite a photographic favorite, and these she showed him.

"This is the one I like best," he said. "In the dress you have on now. It's charming."

"The dress, you mean. I'm so glad you like it. I was afraid it was too quiet. I'm never quite sure about my dresses and hats. My taste in clothes isn't always quiet. I love bright colors. They make me feel warm and comfy. You know how dogs like rolling in mud. I have the same feeling about colors. If I see anything very bright and gorgeous I want to hug it to me for joy. People are always staring at me in the street because of what I'm wearing."

Chalfont could quite understand that any one, in the street or elsewhere, would find pleasure in looking twice at such a beautiful creature. But he did not say so in so many words.

"You need not mind that," he said. "There's an esthetic sense in nearly everybody that makes them glad to look at anything—radiant."

"Radiant means brilliance, doesn't it? Talking of brilliance, do you like this?"

She held out her arm with the bracelet on it. Chalfont had already noticed it. Now he gave it a closer inspection. Whilst being a good judge of precious stones he had a great liking for paste when it was old and good, but what he saw now was merely a product of the modern manufacturer.

"A French copy, isn't it?" he asked, thoughtlessly.

Maggy's eyes widened. French—copy? Her diamond bracelet a copy—imitation! She could not credit it.

"But—they're diamonds!" she stammered, filled with a horrible misgiving.

Chalfont noticed the sharp note of disappointment in her voice and put it down to one of two causes. Either she had been defrauded by somebody or the bracelet was a present meant to deceive her. He made haste to modify the opinion he had expressed about it. Looking at it once more, he said:

"Is it? I'm awfully sorry. Of course, I must be mistaken. Hullo!" he interjected with relief, "here are Mrs. Lambert and Miss Hersey."

Lunch was over. Chalfont had taken his departure; Mrs. Lambert had excused herself on account of a bad headache and gone to lie down. The two girls were alone. The personal equation began to trouble Maggy again.

"I haven't seen you to talk to since you came to the flat," she said diffidently. "Were you really cross with Fred? Of course, what he said about Lord Chalfont was only what he'd heard. I could see by your face you were shocked."

"No, I wasn't exactly shocked," Alexandra answered.

"But you didn't like it. Fred didn't mean any harm. He's like me: he doesn't think what he says. I wish you liked him. You don't, do you?"

"You make me uncomfortable, Maggy. We can't all like the same people."

"But you're sorry I'm so fond of him?"

"Very sorry," said Alexandra in a low voice.

"I can't stop caring because of that. It's—it's in my system. Some girls fall in love with a man because they believe he's good or noble or brave or something they're particularly keen on; but if they find out they're mistaken they're off that man like fleas from a dead rabbit. If that sounds vulgar please forgive me, Lexie. The words just came out. It's one of Fred's expressions. What I mean is, I can't love like that, though I know I should be much more comfortable if I could. If I knew you'd stolen Mrs. Lambert's purse or gone off with a rag-picker it wouldn't make a bit of difference to me. It's you I love, not what you do. And I feel the same about Fred, only more so."

Prior to this, Mrs. Lambert had asked Alexandra a few questions about Maggy's relations with Woolf. The answers she had fitted in with certain information about the man himself previously imparted to her by Chalfont. What she deduced from the two statements made her sorry for Alexandra's friend and a little anxious about her.

"No girl is safe with a man like that," she had said to Alexandra. "If I were you I should try and persuade her to break with him."

And Alexandra meant to try. There was one weapon she might have used to shake Maggy's loyalty to Woolf: the cruelly belittling way in which he had referred to her just before her cab drove off. But she shrank from that. It was too poisonous.

"What would you say if I asked you to leave him?" she asked. "Supposing I needed you back with me?"

Maggy weighed the problem.

"I should say you jolly well knew I couldn't come," she answered. "I'm all in. If Fred was in Hell and wanted me there I believe I'd have to get to him. You don't know what it is."

"What is it?"

"It's the little things about him that have eaten into me. I'm corrupted, or

corroded, whatever it is. Perhaps it's both. I love the white lock in his hair, the little pellet in his ear where he got peppered out shooting once, the scent of his tobacco, the smell of a Harris tweed suit he's got." She sniffed sensuously. "And there are other things I can't tell you about..."

"If he were to die or married some one else you would have to resign yourself to doing without him," argued Alexandra.

"Perhaps. I don't know. He's not dead or married, and I'm his. I know he could manage without me. I'm just like an ornament to him. He dusts me and puts me back on my shelf, and takes me down sometimes and has a look at me. I hope to God he'll never drop or break me!"

Alexandra was disturbed by the depth of passion in her voice.

"I know what you think about Fred," Maggy went on. "You think he's something near a cad. Well, there are lots of women who love cads and who don't know that they are cads. Perhaps I'm one of them. You can't put me out of this, Lexie dear. I don't know how it's going to end and I don't want to know. That's where real life is rather like the stage. The tag to a play's kept dark, never spoken until the curtain's about to hide the players from view. If we knew how things were going to end with us—knew the tags to our lives—I guess some of us wouldn't be able to go on with our parts off the stage."

It was like arguing with a fatalist. Her loyalty to Woolf was as unalterable as destiny. Alexandra gave up trying to move her. She changed the conversation, and an hour later Maggy went upstairs in response to a message from Mrs. Lambert, who wanted to say good-by to her.

Mrs. Lambert's bedroom was in half darkness. She was still racked with a headache, but she wanted to see Maggy and to hear whether Alexandra had succeeded in persuading her to break with Woolf. For this purpose she had left the two girls alone together. Maggy closed the door gently behind her and tip-toed toward the bed.

"I'm so sorry you feel bad," she said feelingly. "It won't do for me to stop talking to you. That will make your head worse. I'll just say good-by and go. Thank you for being so kind to me. It was nice to come and see Lexie here."

"You're very fond of her?" asked Mrs. Lambert.

"She's fine. I lived with her, you see. When you live for weeks with another girl in one room, and don't have a cross word it stands to reason one of you must be eighteen-carat. That's Lexie. She never complained or lost heart, not even when things were bad and I left her. She's the quiet sort but she's a fighter. There were soldiers in her family. It comes out in her. But I've started to talk—"

"You don't tire me. Sit down. It's refreshing to hear a woman speak well of another. Rather a novelty too. Aren't you jealous of her going away with me?"

"No, I'm awfully glad she's found you. I was thinking this afternoon how

well she fitted in with everything here. She's a lady, like you. Things that I never fretted about because I wasn't used to them, she must have missed terribly. She's fine lace. I'm crochet work."

Mrs. Lambert laid her thin hand on Maggy's.

"How would you like to come on tour with us?" she asked. "I could make room for you. But I suppose your contract at the Pall Mall wouldn't permit of it?"

The unexpected proposition was tempting enough. Under different circumstances Maggy would have jumped at it.

"It isn't the contract that would stop me," she said with some hesitation. "But I've got a—flat."

There was a pregnant pause.

"And there's another reason.... I—I have to go away for a little while ... and I was glad that Lexie would be away. Oh, what have I said? You don't understand?"

"I think I do."

Maggy's face flushed crimson and then went white. Mrs. Lambert's hand still lay on hers. Contact with it gave her a feeling of sisterhood, a longing to confide. Her pent up feelings suddenly found voice.

"I want to tell some one," she choked. "I've got to go through with something I hate—and dread. I've longed to speak to another woman about it, but there was only Lexie, and she's not"—she stumbled over the word—"married. I wouldn't tell her. It wouldn't have been right."

"Tell me."

"I—can't see your face," whispered Maggy fearfully.

"It's not turned from you."

Then Maggy unburdened her soul. A flood of unreserved words broke from her. Mrs. Lambert neither moved nor spoke, but the grasp of her hand tightened as the poignant story culminated.

"I daren't let myself think about it," Maggy's faltering voice went on. "If I think too much my brain begins to rock, and I'm afraid. It's wonderful and awful and I don't feel the same. The other day I saw a woman in the street. She had such a pretty baby in her arms. It was too heavy for her to carry, and she looked dead tired, but I could see by her face how she loved it, weight and all, and I had to hold on to myself to stop from screaming out, 'You're lucky. You can keep yours. I—'" Something she dimly discerned in Mrs. Lambert's face brought her to a sudden stop. "Why, I've made you cry!" she said contritely. "What a brute I am!"

"No, no. Don't take your hand away," was the soft rejoinder. "You poor child! My heart aches for you."

When Maggy re-entered the drawing room her eyes were suspiciously red. She seemed anxious to get away. She put her arms round Alexandra and hugged her.

"Good-by, Lexie," she said breathlessly. "Don't forget me. The best of luck. Mrs. Lambert's an angel. T-tell her so—from me."

She tore herself away, pulled down her veil, and was gone, leaving Alexandra bewildered.

Maggy stopped at a jeweler's on her way home. Taking off her bracelet, she handed it to the man behind the counter.

"Don't bother to tell me what it's worth. Just say whether it's real or sham," she said.

It was sham.

She dropped it into her bag and went out, with a new pain gripping at her heart. She never wore the bracelet again.

After dinner that evening Woolf remarked its absence. She had worn it ever since he had given it to her.

"Where's your bracelet?" he inquired. "I hope you haven't left it about or had it stolen."

"Fred," she said, looking him steadily in the eyes, "I found out quite by accident that it isn't real. Wait a minute. Let me finish. You know I don't care tuppence about the value of anything you give me. It isn't the cost I think of. If you'd given me a ring out of a penny cracker I wouldn't have changed it for another from somebody else a million times its value. But don't sham to me. I—I can't bear it."

"I never told you they were real diamonds," he rejoined in a nettled voice. "If I didn't say they were paste you ought to have guessed it. Anyhow, the bracelet cost me twenty pounds. Genuine stones that size would have run to the price of a damn good race horse." He gave her a disparaging look. "Why, all in, you don't cost me as much as one of the animals I've got in training."

The words froze her. She stared at him in dumb agony.

"Oh, my heart!" she cried, with a sudden catch at her breath.

He sat still, coldly indifferent.

"And I've given it to you!" she presently whispered.

Alexandra's longing to act, to appear before an impartial audience in a play reflecting every-day life, was at last satisfied when the tour began. Her part was a very small one, that of a parlormaid only, but it did not prevent her going through the usual phases of stage fright at the first performance. On the second night she was calm and collected. At the end of a week it surprised her to find that she was no longer under the spell of theatricalism.

Had she joined the company in the ordinary way the glamour of the stage would have got hold of her and remained with her for a long time. As an insignificant member of it, out of touch with its leading light, she would have imagined mysteries where none existed. But from the very first all these so-called mysteries were exposed. She was like the assistant to the conjuror: she saw how things were done.

In the first place, Mrs. Lambert did not pose as any high-priestess of the drama: she was rather contemptuous of the stage. She thought of it as a way to make an easy living, that was all. Alexandra's notions about the stage were all associated with Art: Mrs. Lambert's were confined to figures. She and her manager talked business unexcitedly for an hour every day, never esthetics. She was mildly amused when Alexandra showed her enthusiasm for acting, as she did in that first week.

"You'll get over it, my dear," she said. "It's not an art, merely a matter of temperament. If acting were creative one could take it seriously, but it isn't. The author creates; the actor only represents. When I'm acting I often feel like the inside of a moving picture show. It's all mechanical."

"But," said Alexandra, "you weren't always like that? When you first went on the stage—"

"I felt as you do, all emotion and inexperience. Now that I've lived and am disillusioned I know that the stage is only a business, and not a very edifying one. The public don't see that side of it, fortunately. They think only of the amusement it provides. If they would stop there it wouldn't matter: but they have such a mania for everything theatrical in this country, such a desire to penetrate beyond the footlights, that they quite forget the necessity for a curtain between the make-believe of the stage and themselves. They're like a child with a toy. They want to see the inside mechanism, and directly they do they suffer the usual disappointment. I never take people 'behind'; if I do I always find they never again want to pay for a seat 'in front.' We're only shop-keepers, after all, and shop-keepers don't invite their customers behind the counter, any more than the customers are in the habit of asking their butcher or their baker to dinner. Somehow you can't get the public to see things like that. Instead of keeping members of the stage at a distance, treating them like kennel-dogs, they invite them to their houses and pamper them. It makes them more conceited and self-

sufficient than they are already. I don't deny that a few actors and actresses are decently born and bred, indoor dogs, so to speak, knowing their manners; but that's no reason why the whole pack should be made free of the public's drawing rooms.... Let us walk up to the cathedral and spend a quiet hour there."

The tour had opened in a small cathedral town, and the three hours spent at the theater each night hardly counted in their daily round. They motored about the surrounding country, or read, talked and did needlework in the private sitting room of their quiet hotel. Such a life, placid and yet full of pleasant occupation, was delightful to Alexandra. She found the weekly change from town to town exhilarating, and the journey each Sunday in Mrs. Lambert's comfortable landaulette a luxurious mode of traveling.

At the end of their first week Chalfont came down and remained with them for the rest of the tour. Both he and Mrs. Lambert treated Alexandra on terms of equality so that she never felt an intruder on their intimacy. Before her they made no secret of their attachment, but she never regarded it as anything more close than what might exist between old and tried friends. Sometimes she detected in Mrs. Lambert quite a sisterly attitude toward Lord Chalfont. That was probably accounted for by the differences in their ages, she being a few years the elder.

Chalfont often asked after Maggy. He had quite an open admiration for her, which Mrs. Lambert shared. But, unlike him, she seldom asked for news of her. At the time, Alexandra did not notice this apparent lack of interest. She was not able to impart anything about Maggy for the simple reason that she had not heard from her. Only twice during the early days of the tour had there been a letter from her. After that, although Alexandra repeatedly wrote, she got no reply. She could not help wondering at this silence. It was not like Maggy. Later, when she spoke of it to Mrs. Lambert, the latter did not seem surprised.

"You're sure to hear from her soon. She may be away," she said.

And a letter did arrive from Maggy shortly afterwards. It was written in pencil and strangely shaky, quite unlike her habitual hand, which although childish, was remarkably firm. She said very little, confirmed Mrs. Lambert's prophecy by admitting that she had been away for a change, owing to which she had not received Alexandra's letters until her return. She ended with a postscript which had evidently been added in a burst of feeling.

"I love Fred more than ever, Lexie. I couldn't exist without him. He has been such a dear since I got back."

Alexandra passed it across the breakfast table to Mrs. Lambert, with the remark:

"It's from Maggy. She doesn't say what has been the matter with her, though."

Chalfont looked up.

"Has your friend been ill?" he asked with concern. "I'm sorry to hear that. We must send her some flowers, Ada."

"Yes, we will," Mrs. Lambert concurred.

After breakfast he went out to buy some. When he came back Mrs. Lambert was alone in the room.

"What beauties!" she said, lifting the lid of the box he had brought in with him. "Catherine Mermets."

She hung over the roses, the bitter-sweet of the memories they evoked coming up to her with their delicate fragrance. Chalfont always bought her Catherine Mermets when they were in bloom, great masses of them; but it was Hugh Lambert who had first given her a bunch of three, purchased at a street corner at sixpence each in the days when sixpences were scarce with him.

"I got them because they are your favorites," he said. "I thought she would be sure to like what you like. Anyway, what's good enough for you is good enough for anybody."

She put her arm over his shoulder and kissed him.

"You're always so thoughtful, and so loyal," she said. "I'm getting old and you remain steadfast. It seems such an irony of fate that I can't love you as you deserve. Although Hugh has no claim on my feelings or my memory, I can't forget him. I give you so little, Leonard. One day, perhaps, some girl will love you worthily, and make up for my meanness."

He smiled down at her, shaking his head.

"Keep those roses," he said. "I'll get Miss Delamere some more."

"No, no, I want her to have them. Put your card in. Shall I write the address?"

Woolf was with Maggy when the post brought her the roses. He cut the string and stood looking on while she removed the tissue wrappings.

"Oh, roses!" she cried delightedly. "Who can have sent them?"

They had traveled as well as could be expected of cut flowers, but they were flagging a little for want of water.

Woolf pounced on the card that accompanied them.

"Lord Chalfont," he read, and scowled at the club address in the corner. "Damn his impudence sending you flowers! And how the devil does he know your address?" he demanded angrily.

Maggy was perturbed at this outburst.

"You needn't mind, Fred," she said placably.

"Did you tell him where you lived?"

"Of course not. You needn't go back to that. You said you'd forgiven me

for going to lunch with Mrs. Lambert that day. You know I met him there, and that's all there is in it. He must have known that I—I hadn't been well—through Lexie, and sent the flowers out of politeness." She turned the lid of the box up. "The address is in a woman's hand: Mrs. Lambert's. There's nothing to look so furious about."

The fact that flowers should come to Maggy from a comparative stranger would not, of itself, have irritated Woolf. She often received flowers now, and from men she had never met. Her good looks and prominence at the Pall Mall accounted for this. Woolf made no objection. The admiration of other men for her rather enhanced her desirability in his eyes. He took it as a tribute to his own good taste in having secured possession of her. But Chalfont's name affected him in much the same manner as a red rag does a bull. It blinded him with rage because it stood for everything that he himself was devoid of—birth, breeding, nobility of nature—and, moreover, because it was that of the man who had humbled him by having him turned out of the select club to which he aspired to membership. That incident had touched Woolf on the raw. It was much as if he had been told that he was unworthy of association with gentlemen.

He picked up the roses and pitched them into the fireplace.

"Damned cheek, sending you a few pennyworth of dead flowers!" he flared out. "I'll go and buy you some live ones!"

Maggy did not protest. She had learnt discretion with Woolf. He flung out of the flat. Half-an-hour later a messenger boy came with a magnificent bouquet of freshly-cut Catherine Mermets.

Maggy was so happy arranging them.

XXI

In spite of the pleasant conditions under which the tour proceeded it began to be evident to Alexandra that Mrs. Lambert was suffering from acute nervous strain. She would spend hours on the sofa in thoughtful silence. Conversely, she showed undue vivacity on the stage at night. Sometimes she evinced an almost feverish interest in the financial side of her tour, growing depressed when business was indifferent and unduly elated when it was extra good.

During this period Alexandra learnt for the first time that Mrs. Lambert had a daughter. Inconsequently enough, as it seemed to her, Mrs. Lambert's reference

to the fact was the outcome of a talk between them one day concerning Maggy. It showed the elder woman in a new aspect, strongly maternal in her feelings. The child's absence evidently distressed her.

"Why don't you have her with you?" was the natural inquiry that rose to Alexandra's lips.

The reply to this was as spontaneous as the question.

"I would love to! But how could I? Baba is ten. There's Chalfont.... Children are so quick to notice things...."

Alexandra's puzzled look showed that she placed a very innocent construction on the intimacy of these two.

"You didn't think we were only friends?" Mrs. Lambert inquired a little reluctantly. "It's not so. I supposed you knew."

The admission did not actually shock Alexandra, but it pained her. She found it difficult to associate Mrs. Lambert with any form of liaison. Lord Chalfont, moreover, had also given her the impression of being a man averse from it. That these two, in Alexandra's estimation so free from the taint of theatrical libertinism, should not have been superior to circumstances was singularly disconcerting.

"I did think you were only friends," she said.

Her voice was so full of disappointment that Mrs. Lambert half-regretted her frankness. She knew Alexandra to be a very pure-minded girl. She felt she owed her an explanation.

"Friendship as you understand it is difficult, almost impossible, between a man and woman in circumstances like ours," she said. "Lord Chalfont has remained unmarried on my account. I think you must know that my husband and I are separated. Well, a woman is a very lone creature without love and sympathy. There are so many things she cannot do for herself. If there were nothing else there would always be the difficulty of business. I have to work for Baba's sake. I couldn't do it alone. I *must* leave her independent of the stage."

"I am so sorry," was all Alexandra could say.

"I believe you are. My dear, when I was your age, like you I was full of regrets for all the wrongs of the world. I wanted it perfect and morally rigid. I meant to show that an actress could still be a lady and quite virtuous. I don't think I've disproved the one, but the Fates have been too strong for me to fulfill the second qualification. I had to separate from my husband. I did not want to. I loved him. I have nothing to reproach myself with for the rupture between us. But for that I should always have been a faithful wife. I only thought of his career. I used to fight all his battles, on and off the stage. At one time I did all his business for him because he hated it. In those days he wasn't spoilt. He was just a fascinating, childish person with all the sensitiveness of an artistic

temperament. He was very fond of me, too.... Then came the time when he went into management, and there was no part for me. I was not to play "lead" with him because he considered me unsuited to it. I was too proud to play a smaller part in his own theater.... He engaged Mary Mantel. In that play their love-making brought down the house. It was so real. It *was* real. I found that out very soon. Mary Mantel deliberately took my husband from me. He was too weak to resist her—to resist pleasing any pretty woman.... I told them both what I knew ... and we parted. If I hadn't discovered what I did, or suppressed my knowledge of it, I don't doubt but that he would be with me now, behaving as a lover to two women! ... For years Lord Chalfont went about with me. We were friends, nothing more. I always hoped Hugh would make atonement and want me back. But I lost heart, and Chalfont was always there, so patient and kind.... As a Catholic I couldn't bring myself to divorce Hugh and marry him, and I thought that if he should ever get tired of me I should like him to feel free.... Because I am an actress, to whom all things are forgiven, the voice of social ostracism had never been raised against our union.... That is the whole story. Well, what do you think of me now?"

Alexandra did not know what to think, still less to say. The only comment she felt capable of making was that Mrs. Lambert was not degraded by what she had done. That was evident. Alexandra did not make the comparison, but all the same she dimly comprehended that there was a certain similarity between Maggy's case and Mrs. Lambert's. It had never occurred to Alexandra that Maggy was degraded either.... Quite suddenly, like a revelation, the reason of the sympathy between these two, now her closest friends, dawned on her.... Insensibly too, because she was not thinking of herself, her own resistance to frailty seemed to weaken. There was to come a time when she would recall every word Maggy and Mrs. Lambert had spoken on the subject of sex conflict and the stage.

"I think none the less of you," she answered steadily after a long pause. "I suppose you are being more true to yourself in not divorcing your husband and marrying Lord Chalfont."

"I don't know. I'm not sure that I've done right. But the stage makes it so easy for you to do wrong, to choose the way your inclinations lead.... Chalfont has been the greater sufferer. He hates to think that our relationship, when discussed, is bracketed with the usual run of light and unholy compacts. I confess to being more thick-skinned. The stage blunts one's finer feelings, I suppose. There's something dreadfully insidious about it. Its lax atmosphere saps the sense of rectitude. You don't know that your views are gradually altering until you suddenly discover that, like everybody else on it, you are about to make its customs fit your own circumstances. Nobody on the stage is free from that taint: chorus girls are not a bit more frail than highly-paid actresses. Chorus girls are more flagrant, that is all."

Alexandra was looking very serious and dismayed.

"It's rather terrible," she said reflectively. "Maggy has often said much the same thing in a different way. Is *everything* wrong?"

"For a girl like you, yes. I don't assert that everything and everybody on the stage is bad. There are exceptions, of course. Clouds have their silver lining. What I do maintain is that the stage is not and never can be a profession that a nice-minded girl can adopt and expect to remain untainted by."

"I wonder"—Alexandra's voice was almost fearful—"what my own ideas about it will be in a few years' time."

"In a few years' time, my dear girl, with luck you will be married and have forgotten all its ugliness. You may perhaps still be sufficiently enamored of the theater to let your husband sometimes pay for two stalls; and sometimes when you pass a struggling actress in the street you will recognize her by her stamp and thank God that you're out of it all. That's the best that can happen to you."

"But you? You wouldn't like to be out of it—altogether?"

Mrs. Lambert's eyes seemed to hold some happy secret.

"I look forward to the day when I shall be—resting," she made answer. "Have you ever tried to wind a ball of thread with the skein in your hand? It isn't easy. My skein is tangled ... and I am tired."

XXII

They were at Eastbourne during the following week. One morning whilst in her bedroom putting on her hat in readiness for a walk Alexandra was startled by an impetuous knock at her door. Chalfont's voice, calling her by name, took her hurriedly to it.

"Please go to Ada at once," he said. "She's ill. She can't act to-night. I have to see her manager and telephone to London for her doctor. You'll look after her while I'm gone, won't you?" he added with deep solicitude as he hastened off.

Alexandra went quickly to Mrs. Lambert's room. She was greatly concerned by Chalfont's bad news, but far less unprepared for it than he had been. On the previous night Mrs. Lambert had almost collapsed in her dressing room, though she had made light of it and had forbidden Alexandra to say anything about it to Chalfont. Now she was worse, just recovering from the dead faint in which she had been found. She looked exceedingly ill.

"Don't be frightened," she said in a weak voice. "I know perfectly well what is the matter with me. I'm afraid it means an untimely end to the tour, though. You won't leave me?"

"Of course not," Alexandra promised. "You mustn't worry about the tour, or anything. You want a rest. You'll be quite strong again soon."

Mrs. Lambert smiled faintly. "I told you I looked forward to resting. I meant it in its eternal sense. Six months ago I knew what was in store for me, but I meant to stand out this tour, if I could. I'm afraid they'll try and persuade me to have an operation.... Just an outside chance of living.... Oh, my dear, I would so like to die quietly without being cut about and pried into."

The tears came into Alexandra's eyes. Illness she was prepared for, but not the thought of death.

"Please, please, don't talk like that," she said unsteadily. "Heaps of people who are very ill get better. Let me undress you. Then I'll sit by you. But I don't think you ought to talk."

Mrs. Lambert was very passive. When Alexandra had undressed her she lay for a little in silence. Suddenly she said:

"Remember I'm a Catholic.... See that I have a priest at the last ... if it comes to that. And—I must say this, don't stop me—if—it's necessary—afterwards—I would like you to write to my husband and tell him I sent my love."

"Yes, yes, I promise," murmured Alexandra huskily.

Mrs. Lambert turned on her pillow.

"Baba will be all right, I think," she whispered, and fell asleep.

She was awake again and quite cheery when the doctor, a noted specialist, arrived during the late afternoon. He was a long time with her and also a long time with Chalfont afterwards. The result of that conference was that the latter came to Alexandra and told her that an immediate operation had been decided on.

"To-morrow?" she asked fearfully.

The weakening effect of suspense made her shrink from the imminence of the ordeal, although it was not she who was to endure it. Deep distress was in Chalfont's face.

"No, to-night," he said brokenly. "She wouldn't consent at first.... When Sir James told me that delay was dangerous I had to—to advise her to undergo it." He could hardly get the words out. "There isn't time to move her. The hotel people have been very decent about it. I have just seen the manager.... Two nurses are coming."

Alexandra could only stand and struggle with her voice. Her feelings were beyond expression.

"I'm afraid—terribly afraid we have to face losing her," said Chalfont at last.

"Oh, I hope not," she said fervently, while the tears streamed down her face. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes, there is." What he had to say cost him a struggle. "Her husband ought to know. He ought to be here. I doubt whether a telegram would be any use, and I can't go to him. Will you?"

"I'll do anything," she said.

"Thank you. I'll have the car round at once then." He looked at his watch. "It's six now. You can be in town by a little after eight. You'll catch him at the theater. Try and bring him back with you. It—the operation—will be over by that time. We shall know—one way or the other. You would like to see her before you start?"

"Please." Alexandra was very white, but she was quiet now that she knew the worst and had not to await in inactivity. "She told me she would like a priest," she said. "I think you should send for one."

"I have already."

She took a step toward the door but turned suddenly and without speaking put her hand out. He grasped and held it tightly, taking comfort from the action.

"You'll do your best, I know," he said gratefully.

XXIII

Alexandra said nothing to Mrs. Lambert of her impending errand. Discretion counseled silence about it. From what she had heard of Hugh Lambert, and judging also by Chalfont's doubts, unexpressed though they were, whether he would respond to the obligation imposed on him, she was dreadfully afraid that she might not be successful. Still, she could do nothing by remaining in the hotel, and in going she was avoiding the purgatory of having to sit in an adjoining room while the woman who had been so good to her was in the toils of death.

It was half-past six when Chalfont saw her off after bidding the chauffeur use the best speed the car was capable of. The man, who was devoted to his mistress, needed little incentive. Once informed of her perilous condition his one thought was to do his best for her by getting to his destination without the loss of a moment.

Once out of the town he let his engine out. Alexandra found herself leaning forward in the car, involuntarily actuated by a desire to urge it on still faster. At

first her troubled mind could not think coherently, but as the Panhard tore along over the smooth tarred road northwards, the monotony of its motion tended to abate her nervous tension. She found herself reviewing the incidents that had culminated in the present crisis. They passed through her mind like a set of moving pictures, the hum of the engine accentuating the illusion.

She saw herself at home, alone, bereft of the mother with whom she had happily spent so many years in the small and placid provincial town that was like a harbor of refuge to superannuated Anglo-Indians; her departure from it under the eyes of a sceptical circle of friends, suspect because she had elected to choose so unconventional a way of life as the stage; flitting shadows of herself in London looking for employment; the unpleasant picture of a boarding-house; the still more unpleasant incident that had caused her to leave it; then the somber picture of the Pall Mall stage and Maggy. The screen of her mind threw things up clearly now. The perspective of time robbed the little room in Sidey Street of its uninviting aspect, and her life there of its straitened circumstances. Maggy's desertion of her was the one sad feature of that picture. The reel of experience became vivid again as it showed her in happy companionship with the actress. Pleasant scenes and cheerful incidents characterized it, obliterating from her mind the troublous past. Then, close on the heels of this state of content came the unexpected shock of present happenings. From being a spectator of the introspective drama she came to herself, startled by the abrupt consciousness of personal participation in it.

The pale face and luminous eyes of the sick woman filled her thoughts; the odor of drugs that permeated the room in which she had left her seemed to fill her nostrils. She thought too of Chalfont and the self-denying motives that had prompted him to send for the one man he could least wish to see.

It was dark inside the car now, but the lit streets and the turmoil of traffic through which it was threading its way meant that she had reached London.

London again! She no longer felt about it as she had in the days when she was new to it. The novelty of it had worn off. She had seen its seamy side, lived on the verge of its submerged life, been up against the brunt of it. Repugnance to it filled her when she remembered, as she suddenly did, that before many days had elapsed she would probably have to return to it. She found herself shrinking at the prospect of going back to the conditions that wore one down and sapped one's power of resistance in the unequal fight for a living there, from having to resume the weary round once more among the agencies; the interminable suspense in stuffy waiting rooms among the loquacious crowd of out-of-works. It all came back so vividly: her soul sickened of it.

She knew that if Mrs. Lambert should recover she would stand by her. She had said as much. But if she died.... The unhappy speculation was not induced by

selfishness. The next moment Alexandra's thoughts were solely concerned with Mrs. Lambert's personal peril. They made her forget her own fears. She tried to pray for her. It seemed incongruous to pray in Piccadilly, where the car was slowly threading its way among the traffic. Still, surely God could and would hear her in spite of the din made by the motor-buses!

They were close to Lambert's theater now.... Another few minutes.... The piece would be half over.... The car turned down a side street and stopped at the stage door. Alexandra got out. There was the usual difficulty with the stage-door keeper about admittance. He did not know her. She mentioned Mrs. Lambert's name. That stirred him even less. His attitude toward the last-named was that of the hireling inspired by the master. No *Mrs. Lambert* existed for him. Indeed, the importation of her name struck him as the ruse of a stage-struck damsel. They were always inventing dodges to get past him and make him lose his job. Ten precious minutes passed in futile argument. Even in an urgent case like this, vital to Lambert himself, the absurd inaccessibility of the successful actor toward any one of the outside world was borne in on Alexandra with exaggerated force.

"I'll wait here until Mr. Lambert leaves the theater," she said at last. "And I think I can promise you that you'll lose your place when he hears that you refused to take up my card."

Her indignation and her threat were too real to be ignored. They influenced the man's manner.

"Oh, well, chuck it over," he said grudgingly.

She handed it to him. In addition to her name it bore the words "Mrs. Hugh Lambert's Company." She had already penciled on it a line meant for Lambert's own eye. The man went off grumbling. When he returned his arrogance had entirely disappeared.

"The governor will see you," he said. "Up the stairs and the first door on the right." Then he added insinuatingly: "Sorry to keep you waiting, miss; but I get it that hot if I let anybody pass who's wanting an engagement."

She was indifferent to his regrets. All she wanted was to see Lambert and take him back with her. She passed in, hurried up the stairs, where at the top his dressing-room door stood open.

Lambert was playing in a costume piece, a mid-Georgian comedy that owed a great deal of its inspiration to Sheridan. In it he appeared as a beau of that elegant period, and as Alexandra on entering saw him she could but admit that he looked the part. Dressed in gorgeous brocade through which a dainty sword-hilt protruded, immaculately bewigged, lace-ruffled and overpoweringly scented, as she discovered on nearing him, he gave her the impression of extreme elegance, tempered by foppishness and effeminacy. He was sitting before the mirror on his dressing-table, leaning toward it, adding a deeper pencil mark to his eyebrows.

When he had done that to his satisfaction he picked up a stick of carmine and deliberately touched up the curve of his lips before turning round to face his visitor. Alexandra had always felt an instinctive dislike of make-up on a man's face, though she recognized it as essential to the stage. But Lambert's attitude before the mirror was so affected, so vain that he instantly inspired her with contempt.

"You come from my wife?" he asked, and she thought she detected a note of dismay in his fine-toned voice. "Did she send you?"

"No," she answered. "But I want you to come down to her at once. She is very ill. I motored up so as not to lose a minute."

He gave a slightly startled movement at her news. It was as though he shrank from hearing it.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "Where is she?"

"At Eastbourne."

"Is—is it serious?"

"Very serious. They—" the words stuck in her throat—"they are operating now. She wished to see you. She was talking of you to me this morning—"

She was interrupted by the entrance of a third person, a woman who came in without knocking, a woman, pretty beneath her paint, with curiously hard blue eyes. She stared at Alexandra with open hostility and then looked interrogatively at Lambert.

"This lady has come up from Eastbourne," he hesitated. "My wife is ill and wants to see me."

After a momentary silence the newcomer allowed herself a trifling shrug of the shoulders.

"She has been ill before," she said a little contemptuously, and turned to Alexandra. "What is it this time? A bilious attack?"

Alexandra looked at her steadily, perhaps disdainfully. She guessed she had to do with Mary Mantel, the woman who had displaced Mrs. Lambert in her husband's affections.

"We fear she is dying," was her rejoinder.

The other woman laughed.

"Oh, I see! Advertising her 'farewell to the stage.' I daresay she will take her time over it."

Lambert turned on her.

"Be quiet!" he exclaimed irritably.

Again she shrugged. "It's our call directly."

"I can't help that. MacBride must go on for me."

He picked up a towel and was about to remove the grease paint from his face, but stopped at the ejaculation that broke from her.

"You can't possibly go to-night," she burst out. "Evidently these people"—she made an impatient gesture that indicated Alexandra—"don't know that it's the last night of your season, and that you're booked to leave for America in three days' time. Or probably they don't care. To think of throwing up your part at a moment's notice and letting the curtain come down in your absence is madness. You must stop for your speech. If you want to you can go first thing to-morrow, though you'll probably have a wire by then to say your wife's better and won't see you for worlds!"

A boy put his head in at the door.

"Your call, sir," he announced.

Lambert got up, the towel still in his hand, the paint still on his face. Alexandra watched the indecision in it. Had he enough strength of mind to come? Or would he let self-interest prevail?

"Hugh, do be guided by me," begged Miss Mantel. "Think of your career. There will be call on call for you at the end of the show. The house is full of pressmen. Are you going to throw away hundreds of pounds' worth of gratuitous advertisement?"

That last argument decided him. Publicity, the acclamation of the crowd, the opportunity to pose before it, to deliver the carefully-prepared speech, egotistical yet full of sham humility, were temptations he was unable to resist. With a quiver of his painted lips that owed nothing to solicitude for a wife who lay between life and death, he said:

"I'll come in the morning;" and without looking at Alexandra, made for the stage.

She heard the thunder of applause that greeted him. To the little tin gods the plaudits of the multitude are as the music of the spheres.

XXIV

It was verging on midnight when Chalfont came out of the sick room to hear the result of Alexandra's errand. The moment he saw that she was alone, limp and tired from her journey, he knew it had failed. He had had the forethought to have some cold supper ready for her, and while she ate a little of it and drank the glass of champagne which he insisted on her taking, he answered her many questions about Mrs. Lambert. In tones of sad resignation he told her that the

operation had been successful but that there was little hope. She had taken the anesthetic badly and was still under its influence.

"So Lambert wouldn't come?" he asked, when the painful subject was exhausted.

"I believe he was willing to come," she replied. "I saw him alone first. But Miss Mantel came in and dissuaded him. It was a last night. He had to make a speech. She urged him to stay. He's very weak, I think. He said he would come in the morning. Can I go to her?"

"Better not. The nurse will let us know when she is conscious. It oughtn't to be long now. Lie down on the sofa and try to sleep."

She was too anxious for that, so they sat waiting, for hours as it seemed. Now and again they talked, but most of the time absorbed and troubled thought held them silent. No sound came from the next room. Presently its quiet was broken by the monotonous drone of a man's voice. Alexandra sat up, listening.

"Who is that?" she asked.

"The priest. He's with her."

Twice they heard a faint murmur mingled with a low intoning. Another half-hour passed. Then the priest came noiselessly into the room. He drew Chalfont on one side and they spoke together in whispers.

Presently the latter beckoned to Alexandra.

"Come," he said; and the three went into the sick room.

A light, carefully screened, threw the bed in shadow, but not sufficiently to hide the still form that lay upon it. Although the pallor of death was in Mrs. Lambert's face, it seemed to have grown youthful. She looked like a child asleep. Her eyes were closed. They could not tell whether she was aware of their presence or not. The priest stood at the foot of the bed lost in prayer. The nurses, still and white like statues, watched from a distance.

Chalfont, kneeling with a hand laid gently on that of the woman he loved, broke the long silence.

"Speak to us," he implored.

She heard his voice and opened her eyes. They had a spectral look, and as she turned them from him to Alexandra an expression of concern crept into her face. She murmured something faintly.

"Your husband will be here in the morning, dearest," he said softly but distinctly, trying to stimulate her to consciousness.

Some weighty thought was affecting her mind. Her eyes were on Chalfont. She seemed to be making an effort to say something.

"That poor girl ... that nice girl..."

Chalfont bent low, fearful of losing the whispered words.

"What poor girl, dear?"

They thought she said "Maggy."

Lambert arrived at six the next morning. His first concern was to explain breathlessly to Alexandra that he had been detained ... a business matter ... farewell supper.... She would understand.... He had hardly had three hours' sleep before starting. Chalfont and Alexandra could not help exchanging an outraged glance. When she told him that he had come too late his weak mouth opened in surprise. Then his features worked unpleasantly. He stood stupidly, looking as though he were about to burst into tears. Chalfont's tolerance was near its limit. With a set face he indicated the closed door.

"In there," he said.

Lambert hesitated.

"Do you not want to see her?" Chalfont's voice was like steel.

It only wanted the point-blank demand to unnerve Lambert completely. He collapsed into a chair. It would have been difficult to recognize his huddled figure as that of the debonair stage-gallant so familiar and so dear to a host of infatuated theater-goers.

"Do you not want to see her?" Chalfont repeated remorselessly.

Lambert's face was lowered. When he looked up cowardice transfigured it.

"I—I've never looked on death," he quavered.

Alexandra, shocked beyond words, thought that Chalfont would surely strike him. He stood over him so long in a tense attitude.

"My God!" he at last exclaimed. "Can this be a man?"

He went to the door by which Lambert had entered, opened it, and then drew aside as far as he could to let the actor pass.

XXV

The London newspapers had not given much of their space to Mrs. Lambert's doings while she was alive. She did not advertise in them. Besides, all their dramatic critics were on speaking terms with Lambert, and even dramatic critics have second-hand prejudices. But now that Mrs. Lambert was dead she was accorded the half-column of obituary notice to which actors and actresses seem to have a prescriptive right. Defunct millionaires and jam-makers get a little less:

British officers who die for their country have to be satisfied with a couple of lines tucked away among the Military Intelligence.

The papers belauded the dead woman. They recorded her dramatic successes with much detail. They were fulsome concerning her virtues. Their readers were left to imagine the feelings of her bereaved and heart-broken husband, who at the moment was sorting an auction-bridge hand in the cardroom of a transatlantic liner. It was the sort of pretentious gush that had always sickened Mrs. Lambert when she read it about others.

The funeral was largely attended by members of the theatrical profession. Few of them knew the deceased personally, but as the occasion provided an opportunity for public exhibition and incidentally for getting their names into the papers they did not miss it.

Maggy was not of these. Woolf had made some engagement for her which he would not let her break. But she sent a wreath. It was quite unlike any of the others. Hers was composed of autumn-tinted leaves and the last homely flowers that one sees in cottage gardens. She purposely wished to avoid the conventional effect aimed at by the professional florist whose stiff made-to-order wreath implies such indifference to death.

Alexandra placed it at the head of the coffin. Mary Mantel had also sent one, ordered before she left for America with Lambert. But Alexandra refused to take it in. Lambert's card was inscribed "From your sorrowing husband." All the newspapers dragged in those words with a suitably unctuous comment.

Late on the afternoon of the funeral Maggy managed to evade Woolf and go to Albert Place, thinking to find Alexandra there. The blinds had not yet been drawn up, but the front door was open. Feeling an aversion from disturbing the silence of a house of mourning she went in without ringing and ascended to the room Alexandra had used. Finding it empty she came down and looked into the drawing room. It was in the green gloom of a closed *jalousie* and she thought it unoccupied. In that room she had spent such a pleasant half-hour with Lord Chalfont not so very long ago. Since then, disaster had befallen its owner, and she herself had been very near to death. The three events seemed associated in her mind.

She was about to draw back when a movement arrested her. At the far end she made out Chalfont. He was sitting at an *escritoire* with his head bent over it. After a moment of hesitation she went up to him and timidly touched him on the shoulder. Dazed by grief and with his thoughts far away he did not at first recognize her. Seeing how it was with him she gently said:

"I'm Maggy. I didn't mean to disturb you. I was looking for Lexie.... Now that I'm here I'd like to say how dreadfully sorry I am."

After he had thanked her there was a pause. His ease had temporarily left

him. Maggy felt she was intruding.

"Do you know where she has gone? Lexie, I mean," she went on.

"She wrote down her address." Chalfont searched for and found it among the papers on the escritoire. "109, Sidey Street."

"Then she's gone back. That's where we used to live together."

There was another silence. Then Chalfont said:

"Will you let me know if there is anything I can do for her? Mrs. Lambert was very interested in her—and yourself. Indeed—" here he hesitated a little—"the last word she spoke was your name. That is why I—"

The color came into Maggy's face. She did not let him finish.

"Did she—did she say anything else?"

"No; only your name. She seemed to be concerned about you."

Maggy nodded.

"She knew all about me," she said in an explanatory tone. "She was worried because I had been ill, I expect. She was like that, I know.... And she knew I—I wasn't married."

Her meaning was quite plain, as plain as the wedding-ring on her ungloved hand. In her honesty she thought the admission was due to Chalfont after he had apprized her of Mrs. Lambert's interest in her. His manner of doing so had implied friendship. She did not want to accept that under false pretenses.

Chalfont was quick to appreciate her motive in making the confession. If possible it raised her in his estimation. But it filled him with a curious sense of disappointment. In spite of the absence of a legal bond between Mrs. Lambert and himself he had a strong distaste for free alliances. He had chafed against circumstances in his own case, and he was far from sitting in judgment on Maggy's. Still, he could not help the shock they had on his feelings.

"You didn't think I was that sort," she said, guessing at what was in his mind. "Lexie's not, but I'm different. I'm not a lady. It wasn't only because I wanted clothes and jewelry, or because I was hungry that—that it happened. I *did* hate going without things. But it was because I met a man who made me feel—like jelly. If he'd had nothing a year I would have gone to the devil with him just the same.... I'm telling you all this to show you why we can't be friends, although I know you're ever so kind."

"Can we not? Mrs. Lambert was your friend."

"I can't think why." Tears came into her eyes. "There aren't many women like her.... You loved her, didn't you?"

"I loved her very dearly. More than she loved me. Though she loved me as much as I deserved," he added quickly.

"And she loved her husband. I know. I think he must be a pig! ... Why do we love things that are bad for us, and men that don't care for us? ... You would

have married her, wouldn't you?"

"That was what I desired more than anything else," he rejoined in a voice full of regret.

This unreserved talk did not strike either of them as strange. Chalfont was usually sphynx-like about his innermost feelings, but with Maggy it seemed unnecessary to hide them. It did him good to unburden his heart to her. Maggy not only inspired confidence, she attracted it. It gave her a double hold on sympathy.

"She would have been 'my lady' then," she said thoughtfully. "What a draw that would be to a lot of women—the women who don't put love first. It's when we love that we don't think what we get by it.... If the Earl of the Scilly Isles came crawling all the way from Scotland and wanted me to marry him I wouldn't leave Woolf."

Chalfont lost sight of her amazing geography in the surprise he felt at the name she mentioned.

"Woolf! What Woolf?" he stared.

"Fred Woolf," she said with a touch of pride. "He owns the *Jockey's Weekly* and Primus cars. You must have heard of Biretta, his racehorse."

"Oh!"

Chalfont was incapable of more than the exclamation. He knew all about Woolf. Sudden pity for Maggy took hold of him. He could not run the man down; he could not tell her that Woolf's name stank in the nostrils of decent-minded men; that even the men who fraternized with him took care to keep their womenfolk out of his reach. He could not tell her of Woolf's shady reputation on the turf, at the card table, and in the city. He saw that it would be useless to do so, and also cruel.

"You've met him, haven't you?" she asked.

"I've seen him at race-meetings and—and once at a club to which I belong."

She nodded. "Fred goes everywhere."

Chalfont did not pursue the subject.

"I must go now," said Maggy. "Good-by.... Oh, I forgot to thank you for the roses." She colored, remembering the fate they had suffered.

"I'm glad you liked them. They were Mrs. Lambert's favorites."

"Oh, were they? If I'd known that I would have got some instead of the wreath I sent."

"It was a beautiful wreath—so simple. She wouldn't have wished it altered if she could have seen it. It didn't remind one of a funeral."

"I didn't want it to. I felt I couldn't just go and give an order to a florist who grows flowers on purpose for graves. I was up ever so early this morning and motored into the country. The dew was all over the hedges. That's where I got the leaves from. And in the cottage gardens wherever I saw the sort of flowers

I'd have liked some one to give me, whether I was dead or alive, I stopped and asked the woman to pick me a few for a wreath for a sweet lady. They were so pleased to give them. Not one would take payment. They were *given* flowers, given for love, fresh and—”

She broke off, shy at having exhibited her feelings. It saddened Chalfont to think of her in association with such a man as Woolf. In spite of it she was still something of a child, with a child's pretty thoughts. But the next moment her womanliness showed itself.

”Are you going away?” she asked. ”I would, if I were a man and had lost all I loved I should go away to places where I could kill something. Wild places, where there's solitude and danger, so that it would be quite sporting to keep alive.... You'd come back feeling different ... and perhaps marry some nice girl who would love you and make up for all that's happened.... I think Mrs. Lambert would wish that.”

She spoke as if Mrs. Lambert were not so far away.

”What makes you say that?” he wondered.

”Because—because she told me things.” Maggy hesitated. ”May I draw up the blinds before I go?”

They pulled up the blinds together and let the autumn sunshine into the room. Maggy threw up one of the windows. They stood side by side looking at the movement in the street. Around a barrel organ a little way off children were dancing. A man and a girl, looking into each other's eyes, passed under the window. On the opposite side a woman was wheeling a perambulator, running every now and then so that the baby in it screamed with delight. The roar of London's traffic came from a distance. Maggy's eyes grew soft.

”Life goes on,” she said.

XXVI

The landlady of 109 Sidey Street opened the door to Maggy.

”Goodness me!” were her first words. ”Whatever have you been doing to yourself, Miss Delamere? You *are* thin!”

”I've had appendicitis,” said Maggy.

Mrs. Bell's face immediately indicated the thirsty interest which people of her class take in any form of illness. She closed the door carefully. A hushed note

came into her voice.

"Appendicitis! What did they find?"

"Latchkey and a bath mat," said Maggy solemnly.

Mrs. Bell looked offended, also disappointed.

"What a one you always were for jokes," she complained. "I believe you'd joke in your coffin. Talking of coffins—"

"I hope you've not been talking of such things to Miss Hersey," Maggy interrupted.

"Not talk about them? And she just come back from a funeral! What else would *any one* talk about? Not that *she* said much, mind you. I only know there was a carriage-full of wreaths besides what was in the hearse. I'll have to wait for the rest of it in the Sunday paper. Miss Hersey wouldn't say what the corpse looked like."

Mrs. Bell was wound up. Maggy knew that the only way to avoid a repetition of the ghoulish verbosity from which Alexandra must already have suffered was to get away.

"Where is Miss Hersey?" she asked, beginning to mount the stairs. "Same room?"

"No; a shunter from King's Cross has that now. Such a nice-spoken young feller. Miss Hersey's in the room with the cistern. I'll bring you up a nice cup of tea directly, dear. I won't put it down in her bill," she whispered in a burst of generosity.

Upstairs in the room with the cistern the two girls ran into one another's arms. But Maggy was not to escape a repetition of the scrutiny that Mrs. Bell had given her downstairs. After their embrace Alexandra drew back and looked at her with concern.

"Maggy!" she exclaimed. "Have you been ill? There's nothing of you."

"Rubbish!" said Maggy. "It's all over, anyway. I'm what they call *svelte* in the society papers. I was all face and fatness before. Fred says I'm a lady-like size now. It's the 'Willow' corset. I'm in the *Ladies' Field* this week. Such a sketch! Just a chemise and— But don't let's talk about me. Lexie, I wanted to ask you something. Mrs. Lambert wrote to me two or three times, and I wrote to her. Do you know if she tore the letters up?"

"I found them. Lord Chalfont asked me to look through a lot of her papers, and your letters were there. They were marked in pencil 'Destroy.' I expect she meant to have done it, so I tore them up myself. There were three letters and a postcard. I couldn't help seeing what was on the postcard—'All over, Maggy.' What did you mean?"

Under her paint and powder Maggy flushed a little.

"Oh, that was—about my illness. Thank you for destroying the letters,

Lexie. There was nothing in them I couldn't have told you, but they were about things you'd rather not know."

"Then you have been ill?"

"Rest cure, my dear. Forget it."

"I'm not hurt because you wrote to her about it instead of me."

"You needn't be. Was it nice being with her?"

Alexandra told her all about the tour. While she talked Maggy began to notice a subtle change in her. Her views seemed to have grown broader. She appeared to be more tolerant of human failings. Her old, hard attitude toward them had disappeared. She showed this by the manner in which she spoke of Mrs. Lambert and Chalfont. It was entirely sympathetic.

"Lexie, you're different," declared Maggy in surprise when she had done. "You've come alive!"

"I don't feel quite the same," Alexandra admitted. "I believe I'm—changing. I've been trying to think things out, Maggy." There was puzzlement in her voice.

"What sort of things?"

"Principally morals and—lack of morals.... Not long ago I had everything neatly labeled and pigeon-holed in my mind. Things were either good or bad. People the same. Now all the labels seem to have come off.... Really, I'm not half so good as poor Mrs. Lambert was, and yet she did what I always considered so wrong. She lived with Lord Chalfont. The strange thing is it didn't make either of them bad. They were just like two married people who had the deepest respect for each other."

Maggy gave a nod of comprehension. "And that puzzles you?" she asked.

"Yes, in a way."

"I think I know why. You're asking yourself whether that sort of thing is really bad, after all, since it didn't drag them down. You've got the labels wrong, mixing up morals with people and putting them all together in the honey-pot. The stage, I mean. It's a contaminating place, right enough. The wonder is how anybody gets out of it clean. Some people can drink filthy water and keep healthy, and others get typhoid from it. It doesn't alter the water. What makes me sorry is that nice people like Mrs. Lambert and Lord Chalfont and you should have to drink it at all. The worst of it is you can't tell whether it's done you any harm until it's worked right into your system, and then you're generally past help. That rather proves that immorality is a sort of disease, probably a microbe, which thrives especially on the stage. What a pity they can't vaccinate us against it when we're babies. It would have done *me* good. *I'm* an example of the corruption of the stage, if you're looking for one."

"You're nothing of the kind, Maggy!"

"Yes, I am. If I hadn't been on the stage Fred wouldn't have thought I was

easy fruit, and I shouldn't have known what he wanted from the start. I went over the line because I knew living with him was all he expected, or I could expect. I don't say I wouldn't rather be married and respectable, but as I couldn't have Fred that way, I've got to put up without it. Marriage and the stage are like oil and vinegar. They don't mix. Look at Mrs. Lambert and her husband. Look at the girls who marry noblemen. Don't they keep the divorce court busy? And you can't do any good on the stage without a man at the back of you. Make up your mind to that. You've got to bury your conscience like a dog does a bone. At first you keep on going back to it to see if it's there, and one day you forget all about it, or you find it's gone. That's the big difference between you and the dog.... So you've come back to this hole, Lexie. Do you think I don't know what you feel about it? You're like Cinderella, only you've been to the funeral of your fairy god-mother. I suppose you'll hold out while your money lasts, and then begin the old fight all over again. But there won't be so much fight left in you. You don't *feel* like fighting. You don't feel the same. You said so, just now.... Lexie dear, don't think of your old pal Maggy as a she-devil taking you up on top of a mountain and tempting you. But I do want you to make the most of your chances. I honestly believe if you take things as they come you won't be sorry. You're sure to meet some nice man sometime. If he's able to—to keep you, do give in. If you love him you'll want to. And what's the use of giving love the cold shoulder simply because he doesn't always go about with a marriage license in his pocket? If it's wrong to talk like that all I can say is I'd rather love without marriage than not love at all, even though I knew I was going to be burnt to a cinder for it."

"Perhaps I'm asbestos—"

"All the better if you are: you'll stand it better. Anyhow, asbestos gets hot.... Lexie, I haven't a regret in the world. I was a bit down on my luck before I was ill, but now I'm well again, I'm glad that I'm Maggy who loves her Fred."

Alexandra sat staring in front of her, turning Maggy's advice over in her mind. She knew she meant every word she said. She recalled Mrs. Lambert's views about the stage. She had less faith in her powers of endurance now. Privation and disappointment had done their work. In easy circumstances any one may withstand temptation: surrender comes with adversity. At the present moment Alexandra was not actually in touch with adversity. She felt capable of holding out against temptation.

"I shan't give in," she said with a little of her old tenacity. "I'm going to try and write."

"What?" asked Maggy blankly.

"My experiences."

"But you haven't had any."

"You and Mrs. Lambert and all that you both have told me are experiences." This was a new aspect of Alexandra. It mystified Maggy.

"But can you write?" she asked doubtfully.

"I—I think so. At least I've made a beginning."

"It seems so funny. Fred says that actresses can't write. All those things you see in the magazines and the *Jockey's Weekly* by actresses all about themselves, with photos stuck in between, aren't written by them. The printer does it."

"Not the printer, surely?"

"Well, the man from the paper. It's all the same. I've been interviewed and I know. All I did was to sign my name at the end. It came out in *The Housewife*."

"What I meant was a serious article. Something true."

"But nobody wants to read anything serious about the stage," Maggy contended. "It's for pleasure.... Fancy you writing! Do let me see what you've done, Lexie."

Alexandra went over to the chest of drawers and came back with her article. It was in manuscript. She handed it over shyly.

"Why, it's pages and pages!" exclaimed Maggy, with the bewilderment of one to whom the space on a postcard presents difficulties.

She commenced to read aloud from it.

"The stage as a profession for women has frequently been a subject of discussion. Seldom however has it occurred to any one to descant on it as a profession for ladies..."

"We're always called *ladies* of the profession," debated Maggy, and read on.

"... To do this effectively one must first try and arrive at the proper definition of the term "lady," and when one has done so enquire into the economic and moral effects which the stage may have on her if she should embark on..."

Maggy raised enquiring, rather helpless, eyes.

"Does this mean you're a Suffragette?" she asked.

"No, of course not."

Maggy skipped a paragraph.

"A lady, we will say, is one who, apart from the question of birth, has been brought up to respect the usual conventions of social life. Let us now consider how far those conventions are respected on the stage."

As she turned the pages, singling out portions of them at random, she found it very hard reading. She thought it like the leaders in the daily paper, which she always skipped. In reality, it was not a bad little article for a beginner, in spite of its consciously correct phraseology and want of cohesion of idea. But as an unglossed commentary concerning the ethical side of stage life it provided food for thought.

"I suppose it's brainy," said Maggy, handing it back. "It doesn't sound a bit

like you though. I hope I'm not a wet blanket, but I think you'll get sick of the crumply plop it will make coming back through the letter-box. It's not what you ever see in the papers. You may ask things about inferior flannelette or horrid sausages or white slaves, and it's all right. But the truth about the stage! Well, there, it's written now, so you may as well post it; but if I were you, I'd go and see the editor in the morning before he's had time to read it."

"Why?" enquired Alexandra innocently.

"Well ... if he's young—and impressionable—it might— No, on second thoughts, don't."

Tea came in. By the side of the teapot Mrs. Bell had ostentatiously placed a small medicine bottle. She had also provided what purported to be a cake.

"I sent out for 'three' of gin," she said, beaming placidly at the bottle.

"Whatever for?" demanded Alexandra.

"For a dash in your tea, dear. Seeing as how you've just come from a funeral—"

Alexandra's face showed a repugnance. Mrs. Bell looked grieved. Maggy intervened.

"Miss Hersey only drinks champagne now," she said cheerily. "Doctor's orders. And I've sworn off. You trot off with it downstairs. Gin's good for land-ladies."

XXVII

Alexandra's bad luck held.

The only engagements she was offered she could not accept. One was in provincial pantomime and therefore not immediate, another a "walk-on" at a London theater, for which a premium of £10 was asked. Suggestions were made to her by doubtful-looking touring managers which besides being only tentative were also unwholesome. One agent made it impossible for her to go and see him again.

The soul-sickening chase after employment continued for several weeks. By husbanding the money she had saved while on tour with Mrs. Lambert she was able to keep out of debt; but time was against her. Soon she would be unable to do without a fire in her room. Coals at six-pence a scuttle sounded to her like extravagance and were therefore prohibitive. She did not think it likely she

would be able to find a cheaper lodging, or at any rate one where the landlady was as honest as Mrs. Bell. In Sidey Street she could at least make sure that if half a herring was left over at breakfast the other half would be available at supper time.

Mrs. Bell was also "particular" about sheets and cleanliness generally. She took an open pride in having a lodger who indulged in a daily bath. The blush of modesty often came to Alexandra's face as she heard the fact being exultantly advertised on the stairs to some new or would-be tenant. Her landlady used it as a testimonial. Once a week, too, the little room with the cistern was "done out," which meant that Mrs. Bell used a duster for a motor-veil and threw the furniture out on the landing. For these reasons 109 Sidey Street was tolerable. The lodgers there were respectable. True, the shunter from King's Cross Station had the room overhead, but as he did not import his boisterous occupation into domestic life Alexandra found him unobjectionable.

She saw a good deal of Maggy, but Maggy was only able to offer advice and the use of her purse, neither of which Alexandra would accept. It hurt her to refuse. The advice she could not reconcile with her conscience: the money, being Woolf's, seemed tainted. All this while her one attempt at literature had kept returning to her with hopeless monotony. A month had elapsed since she had last seen it. She had all but forgotten it when a letter unexpectedly reached her, nebulously signed "The Editor," requesting her to call at the offices of his paper.

She went there full of a natural excitement at the prospect of hearing that her article was to be printed. To her chagrin the Editor, otherwise quite a pleasant person, disillusioned her on this point.

"It's quite all right," he told her; "but I can't use it."

"Then why did you send for me?" asked poor Alexandra helplessly.

"For one reason, because I saw you knew your subject, and it struck me you might put your knowledge to a more commercial use. My dear young lady, there isn't a paper in England that would print this as it stands."

Alexandra had nothing to say.

"It's quite simple," he went on. "Papers live by advertisement. The stage is one of their sources of revenue. Besides, it doesn't pay to vilify the stage. It's too popular. We have to butter it up. Look at this," he flicked over the pages of his popular weekly. "Full of photos of stage beauties, with a eulogistic paragraph to each. Many of them paid for. Well, we can't publish a picture of, say, Miss Tottie Fluff on one page and an indictment of her morals on the next. Now can we?"

"I—I suppose not," said Alexandra, vastly impressed by this amiable frankness.

"If you'll be guided by me you'll leave the question of stage morality alone.

The press, the public and the profession all unite in a conspiracy of silence about it. You're on the stage, I suppose?"

"Generally off," said Alexandra.

"Doing anything now?"

"No, I wish I were."

"Well, look here: why not write something in a chatty way about theatrical matters? Take the exact opposite view to what you have here. Treat the stage sympathetically. Point out its elevating influence on the masses. Sugar it all up. And, I say, not twelve pages: a thousand words or so. I'll give you thirty shillings for it."

Alexandra went back to Sidey Street and sat down to try and write fulsome untruths about the stage. She thought and thought. The ink dried on her pen. Presently an idea came. She commenced to write swiftly. When she had covered two pages she stopped and read them over, realizing what she was doing. For the paltry sum of thirty shillings she, who recoiled from sacrificing her body, was prostituting her pen.

She put it down and deliberately tore the sheets into fragments, so small that she would not be tempted to piece them together again.

Not for thirty pieces of silver!

XXVIII

The cistern, that prominent feature of Alexandra's bedroom, was for once in a way overshadowed. So to speak, it was put out of countenance. If a cistern—squat, square, and forbidding as this one was—could have expressed itself it would have done so in the form of a gasp.

For, on the bed lay the sable coat, muff and toque and half-a-dozen unworn French frocks. Such richness could never have been seen in Sidey Street before. Alexandra's emotions as she stood and stared at them were indescribable.

They had come—several huge cardboard boxes—that afternoon—with a letter from a firm of solicitors stating that the furs and the dresses were a legacy from Mrs. Lambert. The reason why they had not been delivered before was that the executors of the will were ignorant of Miss Hersey's whereabouts. Lord Chalfont had, however, now returned to London and had given them her address.

And there they lay, beautiful and costly, in startling contrast with the cis-

tern and the other unlovely appurtenances of the room. Alexandra supposed the furs must be worth quite a hundred pounds. The irony of the situation was not lost upon her. Here she was in a fireless room, dreadfully hungry, and there on the bed lay valuables which nothing would induce her to sell because they were a gift from the dear dead.

A day or two ago she had found herself regretting the destruction of that sugary eulogy of the stage. She had reconstructed it, but so unsuccessfully that in the end she decided against posting it. The editor in all probability would have forgotten her existence.

It was now late November and a particularly cheerless specimen of the month. She was glad to leave her fireless room each morning for the warmth of the agents' offices, always hoping against hope that something would turn up. Pride made her hide her straitened circumstances from Maggy. She still refused to borrow from her friend. Maggy's counsel was always the same: "Climb down, Lexie. Go back to De Freyne. He'll very likely take you on again."

She put out a cold hand and touched the furs. They were so rich, so soft; they signified the very quintessence of warmth. All she had had for her lunch that day was cold rice pudding—rice pudding made with three parts of water to one of milk. She felt as if she would never thaw again. It was sheer desire for warmth that made her suddenly discard her thin black serge for one of the new acquisitions, a dark brown velvet dress.

Over it she slipped the fur coat. The warmth of it was better than a fire. It permeated her, sent a glow all through her chilled body. She looked at herself as well as she was able in the small mirror on her dressing-table and—thought of De Freyne. De Freyne only wanted well-dressed girls. She was well-dressed now. She had enough frocks to keep her looking expensively dressed for many months. She could not go another week without an engagement. Her money would not hold out longer than that. Even supposing that De Freyne, following his usual custom, should want to put her in the way of what he termed "a chance," she need not necessarily avail herself of it. It was sophistry and she knew it. Allowing herself no more time for thought she put on the toque, picked up the muff and went out.

A motorbus took her to the theater. There she asked to see De Freyne, fearful lest he should have forgotten her name. But De Freyne had not forgotten it nor her. He saw her at once. He remembered the circumstances under which he had dismissed her, her inability to dress up to his standard and her resolve to keep straight. That had been too novel to slip his memory.

His jaded, practised eyes took in her changed appearance, and priced her furs more accurately than she had done. He knew they must have cost a good many hundreds, and wondered who had paid for them. But he made no comment

and asked no questions. He would hear all about it in good time.

"Come for a fresh contract?" was all he said. "That's right."

Alexandra had not got back to Sidey Street when Maggy knocked at her door. She looked very fetching and contented in a gray squirrel coat, a present from Woolf. She often contrasted her lot with Alexandra's and felt uncomfortable when she thought of all she had and all that her poor proud Lexie went without.

When she heard that the latter was out she decided to await her in her room. Mrs. Bell accompanied her up to it. The first thing Maggy noticed was the absence of a fire. The tidy grate showed that it had not been lit that day. She shivered.

"What time do you expect her in?" she asked.

"She's sure to be back by half-past four," said Mrs. Bell.

"Well, hadn't you better light the fire?"

Mrs. Bell pursed her lips.

"She don't like her room hot," she mumbled.

"Nonsense; it's freezing!"

A look, such as a person who is about to reveal a State secret wears, came into the landlady's face. She dropped her voice to a tone proper to confidences.

"To tell you the truth, Miss Delamere, I'm sadly afraid the poor dear hasn't the money to pay for a fire. I've lit a bit of a one sometimes on my own, but coals is coals, and I've my living to make."

"My goodness! You ought to have told me," said Maggy accusingly. "You know I would have paid for it."

"That's what I told her; but she wouldn't have it. I don't like to think what'll be the end of her going on like this. She's so different to any one I ever come across. I've let rooms to ladies of the profession for fifteen years. There was Freddie Aragon. She left me to go off with a trick bicyclist, and after that she took up with a baronet. I forget the name. Then there was Cleo Kaydor who got married to a jockey in church. She used to come and see me—"

"I can smell something burning!" Maggy broke in, and the tide of Mrs. Bell's reminiscences was immediately stemmed. She clattered downstairs to enquire into the false alarm.

Maggy lit the fire and settled herself before it with a book which she found lying about. It was one which failed to sustain her interest. Gradually she dozed and ultimately dropped off asleep. By the time Alexandra returned the fire had burnt red, warming the room to a pleasant and unaccustomed temperature. As she came in Maggy woke up with a start, unable to believe the sight that met her eyes. They went from the sable coat and muff to the toque and back again.

Astonishment and the lovely effect they produced on their wearer took her breath away.

"Lexie!" she cried. "Where *did* you get them? You look a princess! Is it—you don't mean— Are—are you ruined?" she quaintly stammered.

Alexandra explained how she had come by the furs. If Maggy had not been so intent on Mrs. Lambert's legacy she would have noticed an odd look in their wearer's face.

"Oh, my dear, they're perfect!" she exclaimed. "Real sable!" She clutched at the arm nearest her. "Lexie, go and see De Freyne in them. He'll think you've married Rockefeller—or ought to!"

"I've just come from him," said Alexandra in a weak voice. "He's taken me on again."

XXIX

De Freyne was puzzled about Alexandra. Her furs and her frocks baffled him. When it transpired that she was still living in Sidey Street she became more than ever an enigma to him. He could not reconcile that neighborhood with her new and expensive appearance. Business instincts apart from curiosity made him keep an eye on her. Some acquaintance with the private affairs of his fair and usually frail merchandise was sometimes of value to him. Like a good tradesman it was his habit to take stock of it.

One thing he could not reconcile with Alexandra's apparent opulence: he never saw her lurching or supping at the Savoy or similar places. Nor did she appear to have a motor-car, that invariable sign of private advancement. Not knowing what to make of it he was reduced to detaining Maggy on pretext of business one matinée afternoon and sounding her about her friend.

"By the way," he observed casually, after mildly cautioning her against a want of punctuality of which she had been guilty on the previous night. "By the way, Miss Hersey seems to have come to her senses at last. But why does her friend keep in the background?"

Maggy saw that De Freyne took it for granted that Alexandra had a man behind her. She also knew that it would not be to her advantage to correct the assumption. She even deemed it wise to stimulate his imagination. It was easy to do that with a mysterious smile and a knowing shake of the head.

"It's a bit of a State secret," she said with just the right amount of hesitation. "I oughtn't to say anything about it. I—I've never seen his Roy—him, I mean."

De Freyne pricked up his ears.

"But you know who he is? Some foreigner, I suppose?"

"Oh, there wouldn't be any need for secrecy about a foreigner," protested Maggy with wicked plausibility.

He put a few more questions but she refused to be drawn.

De Freyne was anything but gullible, but Maggy's artfulness quite took him in. Her hesitation alone was convincing proof that she knew more than she would tell. She gleefully retailed the conversation to Woolf later in the day.

"Mischievous little devil!" he grinned, amused by her audacity. "What does your precious Lexie say?"

"She doesn't say anything because I shan't tell her. She'd probably go straight to De Freyne and blab out the truth, which wouldn't do her any good. He'll think more of her now. At any rate he won't bother her with men."

Woolf grunted. He could never understand why Maggy was always suggesting that though a thing might be adequate to herself it was not of necessity good enough for her friend.

Maggy was not far wrong about De Freyne's subsequent attitude toward Alexandra. Nothing was said, but all the same she began to receive more consideration. De Freyne kept an open eye on the stalls and boxes for any distinguished personage who might be there on her account. On two nights in succession one such happened to be among the audience. This lent color to Maggy's powers of invention. Alexandra was at once promoted to the front row. When, a week later, a young American Croesus made advances to De Freyne for an introduction to the "tall, dark girl on the extreme right," he was put off with airy nonchalance.

"Not the least use, my dear sir," said De Freyne. "Between you and me, a certain royal personage is in the way there. But have a look at the filly next to her, to-night. She's only sixteen."

De Freyne would not have felt flattered had he been told that his methods differed little from those of the astute tradesman who, not having a particular article in stock, never hesitates to try and palm off the nearest equivalent on his customer. Meanwhile he was debating whether it would not be wise to interpolate a small part for Alexandra. The upshot was that he sent for her and heard her sing. The quality of her voice surprised him.

"Damn it, you know how!" he observed. "Why didn't you tell us you could sing?"

"I sang at the voice trial," she said.

"Oh, then! You weren't sensible in those days. I must see what I can do for you." He turned to his stage-manager, who was present. "'Phone Goss and Lander

to come round. I want to talk over a new song to be put in for Miss Hersey."

The sudden stroke of luck quite confounded Alexandra. Just as Maggy was unaware of the far-reaching effects of her hints, so was she unable to account for her preferment. She hardly dared to believe it would materialize. But a couple of days later her new song and the script of a few lines of dialogue to introduce it were handed to her. She was to have a week in which to rehearse them.

De Freyne watched some of these rehearsals, giving much mental consideration to the style of costume best suited to the singer. In the end he thought out a design in sprigged muslin, looped with turquoise ribbon. It would have a refined and childish effect. Refinement, homeopathically prescribed, would by its contrast look well on the stage of the Pall Mall.

What De Freyne was not prepared for was an expression of gratitude from Alexandra. After her first rehearsal she sought him in his office. He assumed that, after the manner of her kind, she had come to ask for an increase of salary.

"Well, aren't you satisfied?" he enquired, hoping to put her off.

"I've come to thank you," was her shy answer. "It's so kind of you, Mr. De Freyne. I'm very grateful."

He was so unaccustomed to being thanked by the members of his chorus, and so seldom deserved any, that for a moment he was taken aback.

"That's all right," he rejoined. "All I want is that you don't show any nervousness. Audiences only allow for nervousness on the first night of a piece. After that it fidgets them. I'm going to Lucille's for your dress. It's to be *à la jeune fille*. No shocks to your modesty. As for the rest, well, I daresay you'll introduce me to H.R.H. one of these days, eh?"

It was more a statement than a question, and De Freyne did not wait for an answer. When they met after the performance that night Alexandra, rather bewildered, told Maggy of her good fortune and De Freyne's curious remark. Maggy's delight was such that she jumped.

"Oh, my dear!" she cried. "I'll tell you now. First it was your furs and then it was me. We've done the trick between us. But come away from the theater or some one will hear me and then all the fat will be in the fire!"

She dragged Alexandra away from the stage-door and described her interview with De Freyne. Alexandra listened petrified.

"Maggy, how could you?" she protested piteously. "I—I can't let him go on thinking such a mad thing! I shall have to tell him it isn't true."

"You mustn't, mustn't, mustn't!" commanded Maggy vehemently. "Don't you see it's good for you? If you do he'll take away your song and put that Vandaleur man on your track. He's after little Graves now, but he let out to her that he tried to get to know you, only De Freyne told him he hadn't an earthly. Graves told me that herself. And you don't want to get me the sack, do you?"

After all, Lexie dear," she wheedled, "I made it a royalty, didn't I? I didn't think any one else good enough."

"I know you meant it for the best. But—but it's such a horrid idea and so—so far-fetched. De Freyne is sure to find out sooner or later."

"So long as it's later it's all right. You make the most of it while he's dreaming of meeting your prince and smoking a cigar with him in public, and p'raps getting the order of the Boot in diamonds to wear on his chest. It'll do him good to be disappointed."

Alexandra would not have been human had she refused to listen to such reasoning. She might have argued that De Freyne had recognized her talent. But she very well knew that was not the case. It was quite evident to her that had she been without talent or voice he would have commissioned Goss and Lander to write her a song on two notes all the same.

"I'll chance it, Maggy," she announced finally.

"That's right," said Maggy, greatly relieved, and then became abstracted. "You ought to have some diamonds to wear on the night," she added presently. "I wish I knew an I.D.B."

XXX

Diamonds for Alexandra had been no random idea of Maggy's. The question of how to provide them, or at least some jewelry for her to wear on the great occasion, continued to exercise her mind. She woke up full of it the next morning. If they were to be obtained, though only for one night, De Freyne would be wonderfully and awfully impressed. And Maggy was right. De Freyne's estimate of a girl was largely influenced by the intrinsic value of what she carried upon her person.

Woolf could be of no help in this matter. He very seldom cared to discuss Alexandra at all, and considering that he had not shown any inclination to supply Maggy herself with any jewelry worth mentioning he was hardly likely to do more for her friend.

Then a daring thought came into her head. Alexandra had told her that Lord Chalfont was back in London. Couldn't he do something? Ever a slave to the enthusiasm of the moment, she looked up Chalfont's address in the telephone index and then drove there. Her heart went into her mouth as she thought of what

Woolf would say if he knew where she was bound for. But that did not stop her. She was one of Nature's gamblers, and the element of danger in the undertaking gave her a certain relish for it.

Chalfont was just going to sit down to his breakfast—it was only half-past nine—when she was announced. The earliness of her visit surprised him, but he was none the less pleased to see her. Many times during his absence he had recalled her pretty face, her extraordinary gift of honest frankness, and above all the sympathetic womanliness she had shown at their last meeting.

"I expect you think I'm mad coming to see you so early in the morning," she began.

"I'm glad to see you at any time," he said. "Have you had breakfast?"

"I snatched it. I wanted to catch you in, and I didn't want my Fred to know. He wouldn't like me to be here. Of course, I shan't tell him, because I've come in a good cause. Can you lend me some diamonds?"

He was a little staggered by the request. He would have been prepared to swear that Maggy was not of the grasping sort, and yet here she was, admittedly against the regulations, blandly asking him for diamonds at half-past nine in the morning. He laughed.

"Look here, I haven't had breakfast yet. It's ready. Suppose you have it with me and tell me why you want them."

"May I? I should love it."

He rang the bell, and his man quickly laid another place at the table.

"Sole, omelette, kidneys?" inquired Chalfont. "You need not wait, Mitchell."

"Omelette, please," said Maggy, taking the seat he offered her before the tea and coffee equipage. "Coffee for you? And sugar?"

"Thanks."

He came back from the sideboard where he had gone to the electrically-heated stand, smiled as he served her, and took the cup she handed him.

"Do you know," he said, taking his seat, "I seem to have the feeling that we've breakfasted before."

"So have I," she rejoined. "I like it."

"Your hat spoils the illusion, though."

"How?"

"Of a woman in the house."

She unpinned it and tossed it on to a chair. The reluctance that had made her retain it that day so many months ago when she had lunched for the first time with Woolf was quite absent now.

"Well, what about the diamonds?" asked Chalfont.

"They're not for me. I want them for Lexie. But it must be a secret. She'd shake me if she knew. She's back again at the Pall Mall now."

"I wanted to ask you about her. What is she doing there?"

"I'll tell you all from the beginning," said Maggy. "This omelette's splendid. It was through her legacy. The furs and the dresses poor Mrs. Lambert left her." Chalfont nodded.

"Well, Lexie had a hard time for weeks. She couldn't get an engagement anywhere. So when the furs came she toggled herself out in them and went and saw De Freyne. He took her on again because he thought she'd got rich quick, and that there was a man in it. He was awfully puzzled. Instead of asking her he tried to pump me, and I found myself telling stories." Her face screwed up funnily. "Oh, I let him think! He fancies it's a royalty—a prince—who's running Lexie, and he's given her a part and a song on the strength of it. It goes in three days from now. It's an awfully big thing for her. I've persuaded her not to split—not to let on that her prince is all a fairy story. As I put it to her: she can't come to much harm with an *imaginary* man. Now, on the night she'll look so bare."

"Bare?" echoed Chalfont.

"Bare of jewelry, I mean."

"Oh, I see!"

"Her dress is white and pink and turquoise, a duck of a thing. But she won't have a single ornament to wear; so if De Freyne is to go on believing what I told him about the prince she ought to have some. Diamonds for choice. It doesn't matter about afterwards. He'll have seen them once and think she's put them away for safety. Now that's where you can help. If you'll lend them I'll make her wear them. You *have* got some diamonds, haven't you?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, in the bank. Of course I'll lend you some," said Chalfont readily. "I'll telephone through if you like and tell the bank to send them along. How will that do?"

"Splendid! That is good of you."

"Not at all. I'm very glad to be able to help Miss Hersey. Besides, I wouldn't for worlds spoil the practical joke you've played on De Freyne." He laughed. "It's one of the best things I ever heard of."

"And you won't let on to Lexie?"

"Not a word. It shall be our secret."

"I *knew* I could count on you," said Maggy confidently.

Chalfont looked at his watch. It was ten now, and the bank would be open, so he went to the telephone and gave the necessary instructions.

"Where have you been all this while?" Maggy asked him when he came back to his seat. "I wondered whether you would take my advice and plump for some wild place."

"As it happens it's just as well I didn't. You wouldn't be pouring out coffee for me if I had gone to the Rockies or Central Africa," he smiled. "I went for a

commonplace cruise to Madeira and back instead.”

”I’m glad you didn’t, now.... Do you feel better—about things?”

He knew she was thinking of Mrs. Lambert, and liked her all the better for her indefiniteness. It showed delicacy.

”I think so,” he answered. ”I have often recalled something you said when we stood at the window of the little house in Albert Place: ‘Life goes on,’ were the words. I’m going on with mine. I’m trying to make the best of it.”

”I like to hear that. Love isn’t meant to mope over. It’s the sort of thing to remember with praise and thanksgiving when it’s gone. When the loved one’s gone, I mean. When you come to think of it love’s a curious thing. It’s like a very sharp two-edged sword. You handle it so carelessly that it gives you scratches and cuts and wounds that are so deep that even when they heal they throb for years afterwards. I wonder how I should feel—if my love stopped. I think my life would stop too. I shouldn’t be brave enough to go on with things.... That doesn’t fit in very well with what I said just now about not moping, does it?”

Chalfont answered her with a question of his own.

”What is love like to you?”

”To me? A burning, fiery furnace. All great waves beating on me and smashing me about.”

”Isn’t that passion?”

”I don’t know. If it is it’s like that stuff everybody’s talking about—radium. It gives off heat and loses none.” She remained lost in thought for a while. ”Perhaps I should feel different if I were—married.... I dream of it sometimes.”

She was dreaming then. Chalfont saw it in her eyes. Her artlessness seemed a wonderful thing to him.

”The odd thing is,” she went on, ”when I’m imagining that I forget all about the man. It’s like having a sort of marriage service all to yourself.”

”Tell me.”

”Oh, it’s silly.... I think of it to make me go to sleep instead of counting silly sheep. It makes me float off as if I were on a lovely cloud. First I hear the church bells ringing—quite loud, pealing; and my heart goes thumpetty-thump because I’m going to be married, which I shall never be in my life. It seems so important and grand. And then I dress. That doesn’t interest me very much; but I like the look of my face through the white veil. It’s misty, like a summer morning.... Then I’m in church—a great church, perhaps a cathedral, and as I go up the aisle it’s as if God is playing the organ, and I’m walking on all His stars.”

There was quite a wonderful look in her beautiful face. She seemed to have forgotten Chalfont. He kept quite still waiting for her to go on.

”And then the service begins. I read it once. Parts of it I shall never forget. In the church there are stacks of white flowers and lilies. It’s all so quiet and

awful—only the clergyman’s voice.... I feel choking and I can’t see because my eyes are full of tears.... There *must* be sacred love. I feel it all through me.... And when it’s over I’m crying. Sometimes if I’m not asleep I go on with the honeymoon. I see fields and blue sky and a homey-looking house—soft red brick—with a green lawn and cedar trees on it. Their branches stretch out to me like loving arms. I see flowers everywhere. I think it’s a sort of farm, because there are cows and wondering-eyed calves with soft slobbery noses and curly, wet, rough tongues; and lambs with baby faces to make pets of; and clucking chickens and stupid broody hens. I’d be so kind to them....” She drew a long breath. The dream was broken. “Fred would say I’m dotty,” she finished apologetically.

“Do you know,” said Chalfont, “your thoughts are like dainty butterflies.”

“There’s a maggot in my brain, I expect,” was her dry rejoinder, dispelling her romantic mood.

Mitchell came in to say that a messenger had arrived from the bank. Chalfont excused himself and left the room. A minute or two later he came back and took Maggy into another room. On one of its tables stood two mahogany boxes. Unlocking them he lifted the lids and moved aside for her to see.

“I think you’ll find what you want here,” he said.

The top tray of one of the boxes was studded with fine rings; the other held necklaces and bracelets—diamonds, rubies, emeralds and pearls. Underneath, when he removed the trays, Maggy’s eyes opened wide at a magnificent tiara and other gemmed ornaments.

“Do they *all* belong to you?” she gasped.

“Yes, in a sense. They were my mother’s. They have belonged to many a Lady Chalfont in the past.”

“Then if you marry they will belong to your wife?”

“If I marry.”

A mischievous look came into Maggy’s face.

“I don’t suppose the future Lady Chalfont would like to see Miss Maggy Delamere taking her pick,” she said. She became serious again. “I shan’t sleep comfortably while I have them.”

“I shall,” smiled Chalfont. “Will you choose what you want?”

Maggy made a discreet choice, avoiding the tiara and the more splendid objects much as she would have liked to see them on Alexandra. Chalfont put the jewels into a smaller case for her. When he had done that he handed her a little pendant, a dainty thing of small diamonds with a ruby center.

“How do you like that?” he asked.

“It’s sweet,” said Maggy, holding it up for inspection.

“I would like you to keep it.”

“I would like to keep it, too. But”—she handed it back—“I can’t take it.”

"My dear child, why not? It's only a little thing"

She shook her head.

"Fred wouldn't like it. He wouldn't like my coming here either. I did it because it was for somebody else. Thank you ever so much though. I do think you're kind." She gave his hand a hearty grip.

Chalfont saw her to the door.

"Lexie appears on Thursday night. Don't forget. Come and clap," were her farewell words.

She hailed a passing taxi. Chalfont helped her in. As it drove off she waved to him, smiling. To Chalfont it seemed that her smile lit the street.

XXXI

The transfer of the borrowed diamonds to Alexandra was a troublesome job. For once Maggy was reticent. In effect she said, "Ask no questions and you will be told no lies." Hers was the stronger will and in the end it prevailed. Alexandra wore them and De Freyne saw them. His shrewd eyes did not mistake them for stage jewelry. He saw they were real and was rather flabbergasted by their value. Maggy hoped and prayed he would not interrogate her again and that he would refrain from putting awkward questions to Alexandra. He did neither. He was much too satisfied with Alexandra's opulent appearance to ask questions. Moreover, he thought he could have provided answers to them himself.

Alexandra had had her baptism of stage-fright on tour. Curiously enough, when it came to walking into the limelight of the stage of the Pall Mall she was hardly nervous at all. She did not know it, but the loss of her old enthusiasm for the stage made her indifferent. Her sensations were deadened. De Freyne noticed her calmness and put it down to self-confidence, the same confidence that had procured her the attentions of her august "friend."

She did not leap into fame that night. She attracted notice. The audience thought her pretty and dainty. They found her refinement rather in the nature of a *sorbet* between coarser fare. They were not quite sure that they appreciated her air of unconcern but it impressed them. So did her diamonds.

De Freyne was very pleased with her and himself as well. A good many of his friends, several newspaper critics, and others who had a financial interest in the Pall Mall, felicitated him in the foyer on his discernment in recognizing talent

among the members of his chorus and incidentally from among the choruses of lesser managers upon whose folds he and his emissaries were always watching and making raids. He went round to the wings to congratulate Alexandra.

"I've only one fault to find," he said. "You coughed twice."

"I've had a cold for some time," was her excuse.

"You ought to take something. See a doctor."

"I will, if it doesn't get better."

"That's right."

Alexandra had on the white wrap which all ladies of the company were expected to wear over their costumes when not on the stage. He drew it slightly aside, exposing her neck.

"Damn fine diamonds, those, my dear. They ought to keep colds away."

He nodded amiably and moved off. Maggy, minus her wrap, rushing toward Alexandra, collided with him.

"Where's your dust-cloak?" he demanded.

"Oh, who can think of dust-cloaks when they're excited!" she exclaimed, and flung her arms round Alexandra. "You *were* a go, Lexie!"

"That's the third time this week I've seen you without it," said De Freyne testily.

"One and six more for the share-holders. Oh, don't grumble, Mr. De Freyne, or else I shall kiss you, too. I don't know what I'm doing!"

She put her arm in Alexandra's and dragged her off to her dressing-room. De Freyne's eyes followed the former.

"Deep little devil, that," he observed to his stage-manager, who had been looking on. "Clever too."

"They're all devils," rejoined that experienced person, wearily. "But it's a change when they're clever. Talking of cleverness, her friend's worth watching. She's very raw material, but—"

"You mean young Delamere? Clever?"

"Clever as paint!"

XXXII

Maggy had a pleasant surprise in store for Woolf. She meant to spring it on him that night after supper; but before the opportunity arose for doing so she herself

was to suffer anything but a pleasant one from him.

Although he was not in the habit of lavishing valuable presents on her she spent a good deal of her pocket money on him. He was not always grateful for these little attentions. He regarded her gifts as superfluous expressions of affection, especially as he paid for both. At one time and another she had given him a gold cigarette-case, pocket-books, silver pencils, photograph frames, smoking requisites. On one occasion, to his amusement, she had presented him with a crocheted pajama bag with his initials carried out in the design. This labor of love was the product of her period of convalescence.

But now, perhaps to clear her conscience of her innocent traffic with Chalfont, she had launched with extravagance on his account. It took the form of the gift of a diamond ring. She had paid for it with all her savings, and she hoped it was a good stone, because Woolf had the trait which the proverb warns us against: he liked to look a gift-horse in the mouth. She was on the point of making her presentation when he said:

"By the way, you're going to be a grass-widow for three weeks."

"Oh, Fred!" she exclaimed, her face falling.

"I've got to go abroad."

"Where?"

"South of France."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

That he should leave her at all was utterly unexpected: the immediateness of his departure was so overwhelming. She sat for a while in startled silence. Suddenly she got up and threw her arms round him.

"Oh, Fred, take me with you," she coaxed. "It's summer there, isn't it? I've never been abroad."

Woolf avoided her eyes.

"And I've not been well. It would do me good. I'd *love* to travel with you, Fred. I'd have some new trunks with your initials on them, and I'd look so married and good. Really!"

"Not possible, my dear," said Woolf. "De Freyne wouldn't let you off."

"Yes, he would. He did before. You arranged that, so you can again."

"I'll take you abroad some day," he temporized. "I really can't this time, Maggy. I shall be traveling from place to place. I've arranged dates with a man, and I can't put him off. It's business. Don't plague me about it."

She saw it was no use arguing with him.

"I suppose I may write? What are the places?" she inquired disconsolately.

"Nice, Mentone, Cannes. Nice to start with at any rate. I'm not quite sure of my movements, but I'll let you know. You'd better address me *Poste Restante*."

"Honeymoon places!" There was a note of longing in her voice. "Well, I suppose I've had mine." She thought of the ring, forgot her chagrin and went on mischievously: "As you're going on your honeymoon I may as well give you your wedding present. Here it is."

She put it in his hand and hung back to watch the effect it should have on him. He looked pleased, but to her surprise seemed reluctant to accept it. She broke in on his muttered excuses.

"Tommy rot! I saw by your face that you liked it. Hold out your finger." She kissed the ring and also kissed his finger. "How does it go? ... With this ring I thee wed, with this body I thee worship.... There now. It's on. We're as good as—no, worse than married! Kiss me, you dear King. I don't mind your going so very much so long as you'll be glad to come back." Her lips quivered. "We've never been parted before."

"What's three weeks?" said Woolf lightly.

"I shall be a gray-haired old woman by the time you come back."

"Good Heavens! You're crying!"

"No, I'm not," she denied, hiding her face.

"Silly Maggy." He took her in his arms. "Cry afterwards. I'm not gone yet."

XXXIII

"I've brought them back."

Maggy had come to restore the borrowed jewels to Chalfont. It was late afternoon of the following day. She was dressed in gray with touches of black, and her face wore a subdued expression. Woolf had left for the Continent by the morning boat train.

"You were a brick to lend them," she proceeded. "Didn't you think Lexie was awfully good?"

"Very good indeed," he said.

"She isn't a bit excited. Funny, isn't it? She used to be so keen once. Now I don't think she'd mind a bit if she left the stage."

"Would you?"

"I? I can't imagine myself anywhere else. This time twenty years, if Maggy Delamere's still alive, she'll be capering about in the chorus somewhere, I expect. I hope I shall be dead though," she added pessimistically.

"What is the matter with you to-day?" asked Chalfont.

"Blue devils. Mr. Woolf's away. He won't be back for three weeks. He's on his honeymoon."

Chalfont stared at her. For a moment he thought she was speaking seriously. He could not understand her calm acceptance of such a fact. Then Maggy laughed.

"He's gone to honeymoon places, I mean. On business. He couldn't take me." She changed the subject quickly. "Have you ever been to see Lexie?"

"No," he replied. "I wasn't sure she would like me to."

"Perhaps she wouldn't. It's not much of a place where she lives."

"But I want you to give her a message, if you will."

"Of course. What is it?"

"An invitation. It's for you too, if you will accept it. But perhaps you've made arrangements already—for Christmas, I mean."

Maggy shook her head. Her Christmas would have to be spent alone in her flat. It did not occur to her that Chalfont was making her an alternative proposition.

"In that case I shall be very glad if you and Miss Hersey will spend it with me at Purton Towers."

Maggy started. Lexie and she and he all together at Christmas time! At Purton Towers!

"Is that your country-house?" she faltered.

"Yes. You'll come? We should be rather quiet because—"

"Because of poor Mrs. Lambert," she interjected with quick understanding.

"Was—was she there with you last year?"

"No, she would never come."

Maggy was thinking.

"I expect Lexie would love to go," she cogitated. "And so should I. But I ought to stop at the flat.... Would it be very wrong if I didn't? He—Fred—is very strict about me. I wish I'd asked him...."

Chalfont did not attempt persuasion.

"All right," she said suddenly. "I'll come. It would be a shame to prevent Lexie having a good time. She wouldn't come without me. It will be simply lovely!"

"I'll motor you both down on Christmas Eve and bring you back in time for the theater on Boxing night. I think you'll like the old place."

"Shall I? What makes you think so?"

"For one thing because of the cedars on the lawn."

"Like in my dream? Oh, ripping!"

"And there is the home-farm. You like animals."

Maggy's face lighted up. "Will there be lambs and calves and fat squealy little pigs?"

"Hardly at this time of year," answered Chalfont, amused. "You'll have to come in the spring again to see them."

"I don't think I could resist it, if you invited us. May I ask you something?"

"Anything you like. Fire away."

"It's this," she said with considerable hesitation. "I would love to spend a *real* Christmas Day. Would you mind? One goes to church, doesn't one? And I would like people not to know we were actresses. I would like—if you could manage it—to have a Christmas tree. Couldn't you ask some village children—a lot of them? Children are always in season even when lambs and calves aren't. That's one blessing."

"I think that could be managed. Do you like children?" he asked, surprised at her earnestness.

"Like them? It's the one part of Heaven that sounds most attractive. You know where it says in the Bible: 'Suffer little children ... and of such is the Kingdom of Heaven,' and then a lot more toward the end about gold and jasper and glassy seas and streets of gold. I expect there must be a nursery for the children who died young. I'd like to squeeze in with the little angels!"

"You funny child!"

"I'm not a child. It's only my silly way of talking. I'm a woman. Why, this"—she held up her little finger—"this knows more about love and pain and everything else than—Lexie's whole body. Now I must be off. I do talk to you. What makes me? I only meant to stop a minute." She was wrought up at the prospect of spending Christmas—a real country Christmas—under such delightful conditions as she had outlined and Chalfont had tacitly acquiesced in. Too impatient to wait until evening to impart the joyful news to Alexandra she made for Sidey Street as fast as a taxicab could take her. There, breathlessly she told her news.

"How nice of him!" declared Alexandra. "Did you meet him accidentally, or how?"

"How," answered Maggy, and colored violently under Alexandra's clear and searching eyes. "I had to go to his house—on business," she floundered, giving herself away.

Alexandra could not help laughing.

"Oh, Maggy! Then the diamonds I wore last night were his!"

"Nothing wrong with them, was there?"

"No, but—but you must be very friendly with him. Have you seen him a lot since he came back?"

"When I went to borrow them and again to-day when I took them back,"

replied Maggy, regaining her self-possession.

"I wonder what he thinks of you!"

"Oh, just mad," said Maggy.

In a week's time it would be Christmas. The joys of anticipation helped her to endure Woolf's absence. She knew that her visit to Purton Towers would incense him, but she did not intend going it on that account. She would not be doing Woolf or herself any wrong in going. When he returned she would be quite honest and tell him all about it. Meanwhile she wrote to Chalfont.

"Dear Lord Chalfont:

"Lexie will love to come. Me too. But would you mind very much if I brought Mrs. Slightly and Mr. Onions?"

"Yours sincerely, "MAGGY DELAMERE."

Her large and sprawly handwriting covered the sheet. Had it not been for the afterthought in the form of a postscript which she added overleaf, Chalfont might have remained in ignorance of the identity of the two additional guests. It ran thus:

"I forgot you don't know them. Mrs. Slightly could sleep anywhere, being a cat. Mr. Onions is my dog and has a basket in my room. At any other time of the year I would not mind leaving them in charge of the porter at the flats but at Christmas everybody loses their heads and they might not get fed. They are not well bred but they have good manners."

Chalfont did not mind in the least. If Maggy had wanted in addition to bring a tame goat he would have welcomed it. All her eccentricities amused him. Her solicitude for her two pets showed her thoughtfulness and goodness of heart. So, when the day arrived, Mrs. Slightly traveled to Purton Towers in a well-ventilated hat box, while Onions, wildly excited but restrained by a brand-new leather leash, sat between Maggy and Alexandra in the back of the car.

It was a brilliant day, one of those sunny, windless days that belies the time of year. The air was crisp rather than cold, and the two girls, wrapped in their furs and a capacious rug, reveled in the swift rush of the open car infinitely more than if they had been driving in a closed one. Maggy was in prodigious spirits. Chalfont, driving with his man beside him, turned occasionally to watch her, regretting that he was unable to catch a word of her animated talk.

"Isn't life a funny thing, Onions dear," she was bubbling rather than saying. "Six months ago you were a gagaboo little horror eating your namesakes out of a dustbin, and here you are being driven by a real live lord. The beauty of it is you don't know it and wouldn't care if you did. That's one of the reasons why I love you, Onions. You don't mind me being an abandoned female. You don't even know that I am one. That's why King Edward was so fond of his Cæsar. Cæsar didn't love him because he was a king but because he was a man. He might have been a coal-heaver for all Cæsar cared. You little wog-wogs don't know anything about titles or the marriage service, but you can love, honor and obey better than we can, till death makes us howl and bury you."

Onions, straining at his lead, leapt up and tried to snatch a mouthful of her motor-veil.

"Onions, if I were rich I would try to make a heaven on earth for all the doggies in the world. I'd look for all the hungry ones and all the ugly ones and the beaten ones and the ones whose mothers sat on them and made them funny shapes. You should all have lovely patent kennels full of the best quality straw—heaps of it to wiggle around in; and exciting food, bones and the horrible things from insides that you like so much, and sulphur when you weren't looking, to keep you well and make your coats shine. And you should all run about wherever you pleased, chasing bunny-rabbits and mice and the other sniffy things that make dogs so excited. And there should be a special place all wired round for the slow doggies, all full of rabbits so that they couldn't get away. It wouldn't be cruel, because after a time you'd make friends with the bunnies and play hide and seek with them. Oh, what a lovely world we could make it if we had it all to ourselves. Lexie, do look at Onion's face. He's *laughing!*"

Alexandra laughed too.

"How you do lose your head and your heart to anything you love, Maggy," she said.

Maggy gave her one of her odd looks.

"Isn't it a way women have?" she retorted.

XXXIV

The room, of regal dimensions, was paneled in linenfold, and hung with old tapestry. Giant specimens of William and Mary furniture did not crowd it; nor did the big canopied four-poster on its dais much curtail the floor-space. In the wide, open fireplace logs glowed warmly. A dozen candles shed a soft light on Alexandra as she sat in a tall carved armchair by the hearth, plaiting her hair. Maggy on the bed in her nightgown with her hands clasped round her knees was lost in the shadow of its brocaded curtains.

"Pinch me, Lexie, or I shall believe it's all a dream and wake up," she said. "Fancy, a king slept here once. I wonder what he'd have said if he'd been told that hundreds of years afterwards a chorus girl was coming into his bed—" A shy gurgle brought her to a stop as she realized the doubtful meaning she had given to the last part of the sentence. "Lexie, how quiet you are."

"I'm reveling in it too," said Alexandra with a contented sigh.

"Oh, you're a lady by birth. It's natural to you."

"Indeed it isn't. I've never been in such a lovely place in my life."

"Footmen with powdered legs!" mused Maggy absently.

Alexandra laughed softly.

"Hair, I mean. Same thing.... And the dinner served like machinery and yet so quietly. None of the waiters—servants—in a hurry, and everything so natural and perfect. I thought I should feel like walking on new-laid eggs, but I didn't at all. Oh, if you lived in a place like this all your life you couldn't help growing noble and behaving beautifully. I don't feel properly vulgar here."

"But you're not vulgar."

"Well, perhaps not properly.... Isn't Mrs. Pardiston a dear? She's 'the Honorable,' isn't she? I think 'the Honorable' sounds more splendid than 'Lady' or even 'Duchess.' 'Honorable!' It means so much. The others are tides, but 'the Honorable' is an—an—"

"Attribute?" supplied Alexandra.

"Yes, that's the word. Isn't it nice of him asking her—his own aunt—to meet us? Oh, Lord!"

"What's the matter?"

"I asked Lord Chalfont not to tell any one we were on the stage. Mrs. Pardiston can't know. She ought to. She's been so sweet to me. Perhaps she wouldn't have been if she'd known. I think I ought to tell her before I go to sleep."

"Why not wait till the morning?" suggested Alexandra.

"I'm sure to forget in the morning. I'm going to get up at seven to see the cows milked. You mustn't, Lexie, because you've got a cold. And then there'll be church, and after that the Christmas tree to do things to, and—I shan't *remember* I'm on the stage to-morrow. Oh, are you going?"

"My dear, it's past twelve." Alexandra's bedroom was opposite Maggy's. "I wish we had been together," she said.

"So do I. But I suppose in the state of life unto which it has pleased God to call the aristocracy they never do sleep together. Good night, darling."

Left alone, Maggy remained as she was, hugging her knees and thinking. The soft, warm silence wrapped her round. Her excited mind was full of the eventful day: the long motor run ending with her first close acquaintance with a noble old edifice such as she had only previously seen in pictures and photographs. Her first view of it had made her feel as if she could have knelt down and worshiped it. It was all so grand and so very, very good. Her tiny flat, which had hitherto seemed such a palace in her eyes, receded to its proper unimposing proportions. She saw the insignificance of her little white "bedroom suite" beside the stately furniture that surrounded her. She thought of the dignity, the age and the atmosphere of peace into which, as on a magic carpet, she had been suddenly transported, and compared it with the fret and turmoil and passion of her own life. She had been timorous at first of Mrs. Pardiston with her air of high breeding, and then fallen completely under the spell of her charm. It had shown itself so gently maternal toward her and Alexandra, so unquestioning.

But Mrs. Pardiston probably assumed her to be a lady. It seemed absurd, in spite of her having striven hard to appear as to the manner born. Indeed, she had succeeded in behaving charmingly. Only her modesty prevented her being assured of it. Even supposing she had satisfied Lord Chalfont's aunt in that respect, she still felt she was imposing on the dear old lady by not having disclosed her want of social standing. With that doubt on her mind she got into bed, the enormous bed that enveloped her like a warm, embracing sea. It kept her awake. Not more than an hour since, Mrs. Pardiston bidding her good-night had said, "Come to me if you want anything, my dears. You know where my room is."

Recollection of those words sent her flying out of bed. She felt she must go and make confession. Out in the wide corridor she was directed by a stream of light that came from under her hostess's door. She knocked at it ever so gently,

and was bidden to enter. She opened it and stood on the threshold, hesitating.

Mrs. Pardiston was sitting up in bed, reading. Maggy's subsequent impression of her was always that of a white-haired Madonna crowned with folds of soft lace.

"May I come in? Am—am I disturbing you?" she asked timidly.

"No, my dear. I never get to sleep for hours. But what is it?"

Maggy closed the door. Barefooted, in her nightgown, with her hair ruffled, she looked and felt like a child caught in some reprehensible act.

"I didn't know whether you knew we—I—I'm a chorus-girl," she stammered.

Mrs. Pardiston shut her book. She had been reading the story of the birth of Jesus. That lonely vigil of Mary and her outcast Son, the friendlessness and loneliness of it, had its special appeal on this the dawn of its anniversary. Her heart was touched. For some unknown reason also it went out to the girl so wistfully standing by her bed.

"Are you, dear?" she said tenderly. "Wrap yourself in the eider-down and tell me all about it."

Tell her all about it! Maggy was quite unprepared for the calm and friendly overture.

"Would you mind if I didn't?" she faltered. "It would take so long. I dance and sing for my living, that's all. There's nothing interesting about it. But I thought you ought to know, else you might have—"

Mrs. Pardiston smiled reassuringly.

"I should never think ill of a person because they worked for their living. It was nice of you to want to trust me."

"I did. You've been so kind.... But I'm interrupting you. You were reading."

"You can read to me, if you will." Mrs. Pardiston took off her spectacles and handed Maggy the book, indicating the place. "Are you quite warm? But perhaps you would rather go to bed?"

"I'll read a little first, please."

Not till then did Maggy observe that the book she held was the Bible. A solemn look came into her face. Her voice was a little unsteady as she began to read.

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

"Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him...."

Chalfont, passing the room on his way to bed, heard Maggy's voice, and

paused to listen.

XXXV

To get up of a winter's morning to see his cows milked was not a usual diversion with Chalfont, but to please Maggy he turned out at seven and took her to the home farm to witness that process. She was absorbed by it. She had never before been nearer to a cow than the average hedge permits of; and to see them, as she did now, in the family circle, so to speak, was a delightful novelty to her. Her love of animals was very real. She went into raptures over Chalfont's velvety-nosed prize Jerseys.

In her hurry to get up she had neglected to use any of the creams and unguents which she deemed necessary for the adornment of her face. It had been too dark for Chalfont to notice this omission at first, but on their way back he became aware of it, and also of the flawlessness of her complexion. Without stopping to think, he said:

"What have you done to yourself?"

"You mean, what have I not done?" she laughed. "I've forgotten my face. Left it out."

He was on the point of apologizing for his blunder, but said instead: "I like you much better as you are."

"That's what Lexie's always saying. But it's habit. When a girl makes-up year in and year out she feels undressed without it. Savages have that feeling, I suppose," she added comically. "I haven't wished you a happy Christmas yet. I do hope you will be very happy—later on."

"Thank you. And I hope you will be happy always."

"I'm happy now, at any rate. I believe this is going to be the most heavenly day of my life. I feel it in my bones."

A few moments later she burst into Alexandra's bedroom.

"Oh, Lexie dear, happy Christmas! I've been saying it to the cows and the horses and the lodge-keeper's children ever since seven. Give me a hug. I haven't got your Christmas present with me, because it's an eider-down quilt. You'll find it on your bed when you get back. Don't let's think of getting back though. It's so perfect here. What time will church be? I suppose I mustn't take Onions to church? He chased the fowls all over the farmyard this morning. Lord Chalfont

says I can leave him here if I like. It would be nice for Onions, but not for the fowls. There's a bell! It must be for breakfast. Come along; I'm famished."

Church followed on the heels of breakfast. Maggy had never been to a Christmas service before. She was tremendously impressed by it. The maternal instinct, always very strong in her, tugged at her heart strings. Once, as she knelt, Alexandra noticed that she was quietly crying. So did Chalfont.

Mrs. Pardiston and Alexandra stopped for Communion. Leaving the motor for them, the other two walked back. Maggy was very quiet. With the latent understanding that made Chalfont attune himself to her mood he too refrained from speech. Presently she burst out:

"Why does the world only appreciate people after they're dead? What is the good of birthdays when you're not alive? That poor little baby! If He came down from Heaven again they'd let Him be born in a manger just the same. Only children ought to go to church on Christmas day. They're good enough. We're not. Do you know, I wondered I wasn't struck dumb for being anywhere near to God. God was in church this morning. I felt Him. I'm not religious, but I believe in God now. Oh, I wish I was good, like Lexie. I wish I didn't know what love is. I wish I'd never been wicked!"

She was wrought-up. She had forgotten the necessity for reticence. Her confession had to come. The restraint of sex was forgotten. If she thought of Chalfont at all at that moment, it was as a brother rather than a man.

"Hush," he said. "You're not wicked."

"I am, I am," she reiterated. "I ought to have had a baby.... People must have thought the usual things of Mary because of hers.... But she had Him."

"You poor little woman," he said unsteadily.

That he should express compassion where most men would have shown despisement filled her with almost dog-like gratitude.

"I *do* like you," she said with sudden vehemence. "If I had been dear Mrs. Lambert I would have loved you."

"Thank you," he said very seriously.

Like a passing cloud, the strange emotional mood soon left her. Her volatile spirits rose again. By the time she had taken Onions for a scamper in the grounds she was quite her old self. Chalfont, watching her flitting here and there, thought only of her rapturous enjoyment of innocent pleasures, and succeeded for a little while in forgetting that such a person as Woolf with his sullyng associations was in existence.

The day passed with dream-like swiftness for the two girls. They snatched at its fleeting pleasures according to their temperaments. To Alexandra it was a delightful break in a life which she was beginning to loathe, one for which she could not be too grateful. Its very evanescence caused her to enjoy it with

temperate zest. Maggy's livelier feelings made her grasp at all it brought forth with both hands. To her it was a glimpse into fairyland, or at least a world in which she classed herself a complete outsider.

Chalfont had not forgotten her desire for a Christmas tree and the presence of children to enjoy it. All the youngsters on the estate had been bidden to the treat. There were small boys, rosy of cheek, in their best; small girls, eager-eyed, in the whitest of pinafores. Maggy, at Mrs. Pardiston's request, presided over the feast arranged for them. She it was who afterwards distributed the gifts from the loaded Christmas tree. Within five minutes the children were under her spell; in ten she seemed to know all their names and a great deal about each of them. When at last the tree was stripped of all but its candles she started games and joined in them. She romped. She was a child among children.

When they had all gone, Chalfont suggested that before dressing for dinner the two girls should inspect the picture-gallery, which they had not yet seen, and as soon as it was lighted up he led the way there. Maggy's interest at once centered in the many portraits that lined the walls. The landscapes and genre pictures that interspersed them she passed by. Individualities only concerned her, and to these, in the canvasses of dead and gone Chalfonts she gave a rapt attention, stopping at each that appealed to her and asking for its history. One portrait in particular, that of a very beautiful girl, she looked at for a long time.

"Who was she?" she inquired.

"My grandmother," replied Chalfont. "It was painted just after her marriage. She was only nineteen when she died, a year later."

"Oh, what a pity! Why?"

Chalfont passed to the next portrait.

"Her son," he said. "My father."

Maggy understood. She glanced back sadly at the youthful face of the mother.

Chalfonts in armor, in uniform, in silk and velvet and in lace, confronted her everywhere. She flitted from one to the other, admiring, impressed.

"How proud of them all you must be," she said finally. "Fancy having—ancestors!"

As she spoke she paused before the portrait of a woman, perceiving in it something different from the rest. The face was handsome, yet lacked a high-bred look.

"Another ancestress," said Chalfont. "An actress, a contemporary of Mrs. Siddons."

"How did she come here?" wondered Maggy, almost jealous for the honor of his house.

"She married the fourth Viscount."

"Married him!" She stared at the painted lady. "It was a mistake," she said, as though to herself, and in so odd a tone that the others laughed.

When Chalfont set the two girls down at the stage-door on Boxing night Maggy pressed a note into his hand. He read it at his club, where he went to dine before returning to the theater.

"Thank you very much' sounds so beastly ordinary in words, so I must write it, because I want you to know that I am ever so grateful for the way you have treated me. It's proper for a darling saint like Lexie to be asked to stay at Purton Towers. But me—that's another thing. I shall get into hot water with Mr. Woolf for coming, and I don't suppose he'll allow it again if you ask me, or even let me see you. But don't ever think that I can forget your kindness. Although you know what I am you have had me down to your beautiful home, with your sweet honorable aunt just as if I wasn't a common girl, which I am. The only thing I can say is that perhaps if I had been properly brought up and had a name to be proud of I shouldn't have dragged it in the mud like I have my own silly name which can't belong to me because it's the classy kind actresses make up. Don't laugh. I'm not often serious, but I do say God bless you and I mean it.

"MAGGY."

The overture was coming to an end when Chalfont took his seat in the stalls. As the curtain swished up his eyes went to Maggy, scantily clad in diaphanous chiffon. He was thinking of the golden heart of the girl, not at all of her compulsorily over-exposed beauty.

But Maggy was blushing beneath her grease paint. A sudden access of modesty had come over her. It was as baffling to herself as was the remark she flung to the girl dancing beside her—one, two, three and a kick.

"What wouldn't I give for a blanket!"

One evening, a few days after Christmas, De Freyne waylaid Alexandra as she was coming from her dressing-room.

"Your cough doesn't seem to go," he said. "People in the stalls don't want to be reminded of graveyards. It's rather suggestive. You ought to see a doctor."

"I'll find out who my panel doctor is," she said.

"I should prefer you to go to Bernard Meer. Son of the late Sir Morton Meer, you know. Like his father, he's a throat specialist, and not given to charging fees to members of the profession. Say you're at the Pall Mall and mention my name when you see him."

She was reluctant to do as De Freyne wished, but he was insistent, and she promised to call at the Wimpole Street address which he gave her. It seemed rather absurd to go to a specialist for a bottle of cough mixture. She took her slight throat affection as a matter-of-course, a cold induced by the draughts on the stage and the change of temperature to which she was exposed after leaving the theater at night.

When, therefore, she presented herself next morning in Wimpole Street she was in a very apologetic frame of mind. A full waiting-room, testifying to the doctor's importance, did not help to restore her confidence. She was the last to arrive and had a long time to wait. When her turn came to enter the consulting room she was more nervous than she had been when making her first appearance on the stage. She had pictured Dr. Meer as an elderly man, and her discomfiture was all the greater when she found him to be a young one, not over thirty. It may have been prudish—in some respects she was apt to suffer from excess of delicacy—but she had a maidenly dread of the physical examination which she knew she would have to undergo. Hardly had the door closed behind her when she felt that the specialist's keen gray eyes had X-rayed through her sable coat and made a mental photograph of her slightly protruding collarbones.

Schooled to read faces, he saw how nervous she was and wondered at it. Nervousness in De Freyne's young ladies was something of an anachronism.

"Well, what's wrong?" he asked cheerfully.

"Only a cold," she replied. "It seems ridiculous to bother you."

He smiled. For so young a man and an unmarried one his manner was reassuringly paternal. It was not artificial pretentiousness, but genuine and natural to him.

"You ought not to be in the habit of catching cold in such a gorgeous fur coat. We'll have it off, please."

Bereft of the garment, her fragility was evident enough. Bernard Meer admired slight women; but this girl's physique struck him as too delicate for stage-work. He thought, too, that he detected signs of privation in her face. Why that should be when apparently she could afford to dress so expensively was a

puzzle to him. He sounded her carefully.

"There's nothing much the matter, is there?" she asked, when he had done.

"Not at present. But you're too thin. You want looking after, coddling. Are you very keen on the stage?"

"I don't find it altogether alluring," she made answer a little reluctantly; "but I can't afford to give it up."

"That isn't absolutely necessary. Only—well, the luxuries that the average woman can easily do without are essential to you. Get the person who gave you those furs to treat you to a few guinea jars of turtle soup and—"

Alexandra's flaming face made him stop.

"The lady who gave them to me is dead," she said quietly.

A little while ago she would have resented Meer's words as an intentional insult. Now she knew that her connection with the stage had suggested them to him. Probably he meant nothing offensive. As a matter of fact he did not. Still, for some reason which she could not define, she felt hurt that he should have thought it necessary to convey what he did.

She felt, too, that his scrutiny was not entirely that of the physician. She sensed the man in it. Had she also been aware that he was admiring her—a circumstance of which his impassive face gave no indication—and that he was pleasantly surprised to find her free from a weakness common to the general run of De Freyne's beauties, her perturbation would have been greater than it was.

"The trouble with you," he said with friendly intent, "is mainly want of proper nourishment. Please forgive the question, but—are you hard up?"

"No, not at present. At least, not very. I was rather, before I went back to the Pall Mall."

"Back? You were there before?"

"Yes."

He seemed to be thinking.

"Are you in the chorus?"

"I used to be. Now I have a small part."

"But not much in the way of salary?"

"Thirty-five shillings a week. But I have forty pounds a year of my own besides. I should be quite reasonably well off if it were not for the many little things I have to find for the theater. I ought not to complain. There are thousands of girls far worse off than I am."

"And you live—where?"

He made a note of the address.

"Your appetite?" was the next question. "For instance, what did you have for breakfast this morning?"

"Tea, and bread and butter ... and there was an egg."

"The usual sort of egg?" he augmented cynically.

"A little more than usual," she replied with a faint smile.

"I see. And I suppose you will have lunch at a bunshop?"

"Yes. Please don't look so prejudiced. Some bunshops are quite satisfying places. One sees plenty of men there as well as women."

"That's so. Anæmic clerks who should be eating a good midday meal to make up for an indifferent supper at night, and girls who need meat contenting themselves with coffee and a roll, or perhaps pastry! Now I'm going to write you a prescription. Mind you get it made up and take it. Let me see you again three days from now. If you don't come I shall visit you. Seriously, you need to take care of yourself."

He stopped the protest that rose to her lips, gave her the prescription, and, again impressing on her the necessity of coming to report progress, let her go. Why he, who had never previously felt any hankering after an actress, should want to see more of a stray girl, and one of De Freyne's at that, was more than he could explain to himself.

Alexandra kept the appointment and several others after it. Her first shyness vanished. Meer disguised his personal interest in her because he wanted to benefit her professionally. Not until he had practically cured her throat trouble did he give her any indication of his real feelings.

"I think you'll be all right now if you take care of yourself," he told her one morning.

"I've given you a lot of trouble," she rejoined gratefully.

She placed two guineas on a side table. He picked up the coins and handed them back to her.

"Certainly not."

"But—please? You can't do it for nothing."

"I haven't done it for nothing. If you want to recompense me, you can quite easily. I should be honored if you will lunch with me. Will you?"

"But," she hesitated, "I don't go out to lunch with anybody—ever."

"That's why I said I should be honored if you would. Come, we're quite friends. I've seen you four times for ten minutes!"

She wanted to accept. After all, as she had expressed it to Maggy when Woolf had asked her out, there was no harm in lunching with a man. She was reminded of that opinion, now that it applied to herself. She wanted to accept Meer's invitation, but was held back by a suspicion of what these lunches, suppers and dinners were meant to lead to. Men seemed to think that a girl on the stage could be bought for the price of a dinner! And then, in her indecision, she looked at Meer, saw the friendly eagerness in his face, and let reason give way to inclination.

"I don't want to refuse," she said.

Five minutes later they were on their way to the Carlton. Meer would have preferred enjoying her society in a less popular place, but there was a *matinée* that day and the Pall Mall was so close to the great restaurant.

When Alexandra knew where they were bound for diffidence seized on her. Maggy might be there. If she were, and saw her with a man, what would she think? Alexandra felt that there could be no two answers to that question. She entered the big, rose-colored room in fear and trembling.

Maggy, however, was not lunching at the Carlton that day. But Lander, the composer of Alexandra's new song, saw her and carried the news to De Freyne.

"Who do you think was lunching with Bernard Meer at the Carlton to-day?" he began.

"No woman," answered De Freyne. "He hates 'em. Thinks they've got fluff in their heads instead of brains, and that's why they're so light-headed. Told me so himself."

"It was a woman for all that. Nobody less than little Hersey! And, by Jove, it was quite fascinating to watch her. At first she hardly spoke a word; but before long she might have been alone with him in the restaurant. She seemed to have clean forgotten everybody else in the place. And he was just as taken up with her. They couldn't take their eyes off one another. Wonder what it means?"

"Oh, nothing. You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, my dear chap. Why, she only met the fellow a fortnight ago. I sent her to him. Meer wouldn't look at one of my lot, except professionally."

However, when he saw Alexandra that evening he chaffed her.

"I hear you were lunching with Meer to-day," he said. "Was that part of his prescription?" Something in her face so entirely pure and at the same time so piteous, made him refrain from saying more. He had once seen much the same expression in his own daughter's face when she had shyly told him that some one had proposed to her and was coming for his consent. "Damn it all," he reflected. "She's going to fall in love like any ordinary girl!" Aloud he said, "Meer isn't a marrying sort, you know."

Alexandra bent her head as she passed him.

Bernard Meer was in the stalls that night. She saw him looking at her. Once he smiled, and, trembling, she smiled back, and despised herself for smiling, since

now like nearly all the others she had "a friend" in the house.

XXXVII

Prince's was filling up for supper. The diapason of many voices, the tinkle of silver and glass, merged pleasantly with the music of the band; the sound was like a pæan of praise to Amphitryon.

Maggy and Woolf occupied a table at the end of the room opposite the balcony. The latter had been back about ten days, and Maggy was happy again. She lived so entirely in the present that she had actually and honestly forgotten to tell him about her visit to Purton Towers. Of Chalfont she had seen nothing more. Woolf so filled her thoughts that, for once, she was even out of touch with Alexandra. A minute or two at night between entrances and exits was all they were able to give to one another. Then Maggy's one subject was "her Fred," and Alexandra's reserve kept her silent about Bernard Meer.

"Look over there," said Woolf rather suddenly. His straying eyes, ever in search of youth and beauty, had lit on a face he knew.

"Where?" asked Maggy, gazing about at random.

"On your left. Four tables away."

Maggy gave a start of astonishment when at last she discerned Alexandra with a man, a highly-presentable man, rather stern of face, good-looking and comparatively young. Her Lexie with a man! She stared, tongue-tied.

"See her?" asked Woolf, and broke the spell of silence that held her.

Maggy in her excitement half rose from her chair and called a greeting to Alexandra. Until then, the latter, though fully prepared to see Maggy in such a place, had been unaware of her presence. At the sound of her voice she looked up, nodded and smiled. Meer, turning to see who had attracted her attention, gave Maggy a glance full of interest. It was evident to him that she and Alexandra were something more than mere acquaintances.

"What a striking-looking girl," he said. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Maggy Delamere," replied Alexandra. "We used to live together at Sidey Street."

"And now?"

"She has a flat," she said with a little constraint.

"Is she on the stage?"

"Yes. At the Pall Mall. Haven't you noticed her? She's in the front row."

"I didn't know De Freyne had any married women in his chorus," said Meer thoughtfully.

"But Maggy isn't married," began Alexandra, and then stopped in confusion, suspecting that he must have seen the conspicuously broad wedding ring on Maggy's left hand, just as she herself could see it. She crumbled her bread nervously.

"Are you in favor of that sort of thing?" Meer asked abruptly, showing that he had been following her line of thought.

"It's very usual—on the stage," she answered evasively.

"You don't condemn it?"

"I don't condemn my friend, if that's what you mean."

"But do you condone it?" he persisted.

"Oh, how can I tell you? It's a question of what one feels individually," she countered desperately. "With a woman it doesn't necessarily mean that she has chosen that way.... Sometimes she has no alternative."

"You mean that your friend would rather be married?"

"Much rather."

After a pause he said: "Then what is your opinion of a man who only offers a woman love without marriage?"

"Not a very high one. I couldn't respect him," she replied, greatly embarrassed. "It seems such an unfair advantage to take of a girl who has more than enough of unfair things to contend with already. I—I would rather not talk about it, if you don't mind."

It seemed to her that he was deliberately sounding her code of morality before making the proposition which she felt was imminent if she continued to see him. She could no longer disguise from herself that he wanted her, and that her own instinct was not one of flight. Had she met him before she had gone on the stage she would have estimated his feelings toward her correctly, seen that he was honorably attracted to her. But her recent experiences had distorted her views about courtship. Her heart would have beaten to a different tune had she known that his motive in questioning her about Maggy was merely to ascertain her opinion on a matter which, owing to her connection with the stage, must be familiar to her. After her expressed desire to avoid it he let it drop, and turned to another, more vital to himself and her, on which he had made up his mind to speak to her that evening.

"How long must you and I go on like this?" he asked in an undertone, full of suppressed feeling.

Her heart thumped in her throat so that she could not answer.

"I mean," he said, "that it's not very satisfying seeing you so occasionally."

It's true we haven't known one another very long as time goes, but it has been long enough for me to realize my own feelings. I want you. Those three words mean everything that a man can say to a woman. What is your answer?"

The surge of feeling, the thrill she experienced as he said "I want you," left her in no doubt as to her own emotions. She not only loved, she loved without reservation, with a magnitude so huge that it seemed as though a transport of yearning were being pumped into her by some external Titanic force. And it came from him, the man facing, close to her. She heard the clarion cry of sex for the first time in a crowded restaurant, where she could not even cover her face with her hands and so hide her besieged virginity from the sight of men. She could only sit still and feel her shame creeping into her face. Maggy, glancing her way every now and then, saw the agitation that was moving her and thought she was going to faint.

"Lexie's ill!" she whispered anxiously, and was about to get up and go to her.

Woolf's hand detained her. He had been watching Meer, and also seen Alexandra's face.

"Sit still," he commanded.

"But she's going to faint!"

"Not she!"

"Then—what's the matter with her?"

"*Can't you see?*" he chuckled.

Maggy gasped. Lexie, of all people—at last! It was as if she saw a huge warm wave gathering, gaining speed, advancing on the game little swimmer and bearing her off captive.

XXXVIII

Alexandra sat on the edge of her bed. In the little room with the cistern the temperature was bitterly cold, but she was insensible to it.

He had said wonderful things. He had said she was beautiful.... By the light of the candle she peered into the glass, trying to see her face as he had seen it. Perhaps it was the effect of the two great plaits of dark hair that hung framing it, or of a certain new softness in her eyes, of something knowledgeable that she had not seen there before, but she felt that she was looking at herself for the first

time unveiled.

Her hands went to her nightgown, holding it to her; then, as involuntarily, they loosened.

Shyly, as though she were not alone, she gazed back at the dim reflection in the mirror and knew that girlhood was behind her, that she was no longer, as Kipling's little maid,

"A field unfilled, a web unwove,
A bud withheld from sun or bee,
An alien in the courts of Love,
And priestess of his shrine is she."

All rosy, she blew out the light.

XXXIX

Next morning Maggy was round at Sidey Street. She felt that confidences were in the air. If Alexandra was not dying to impart them she at least was "all of a twitter" to hear them.

"Lexie," she cried, bursting in, "don't have any secrets from me. Who is he?"

Alexandra was in the act of writing a letter. She looked up apathetically.

"You mean the man I was with last night?" she said. "I'm not going to see him any more, so we won't talk about him."

"Oh, yes, we will! Why, I do believe you're writing to him now!"

"You can read what I've written."

Thus invited, Maggy looked over her shoulder. Alexandra had begun a stilted little note to Bernard Meer in which she briefly refused to meet him any more.

"I don't think you'll post it," said Maggy shrewdly. "It doesn't ring true. Besides, what do you want to run away from him for? He looked just the sort of man one could trust, not a bit like the stage-door pest kind."

She cross-examined Alexandra, dragged from her the few bald details of her half-dozen meetings with Meer.

"Of course you're in love with him," she declared. "I saw it in your face. If I hadn't been so taken up with Fred I should have found out things before last night. Lexie, what's going to happen?"

The tone in which Maggy asked the question showed that she expected a particular answer, that she would be surprised if it were not the one which followed the line of least resistance. It set Alexandra wavering.

"Oh, Maggy," she said desperately, "if any one had told me a few months ago that I should ever have had to fight against that sort of temptation I should have died of shame! All last night I lay awake hating and despising myself, and all the time I was trying to find excuses for myself. I never thought love would come like this, taking one unawares, giving one no time to prepare for it. If I ever let myself think of it at all it was as of some fragrant and beautiful little plant that one could watch shoot and grow and bud—"

"Instead of that it's gone and done a kind of Mango trick like I saw at St. George's Hall once—sprouted up into a full-grown tree while you waited, or rather while you didn't wait. I daresay love might have come as you picture it, Lexie, if you'd stayed at home. Plants grow faster in a forcing-house; and the stage is, well—a hot-bed. If you're really in love you might as well try and get away from it as from an express train when it's bowled you over. After all, there's just a chance you won't get scrunched to pieces if you take it lying down."

For the hundredth time in the last twelve hours Alexandra found herself wondering whether she dared follow Maggy's example, and give herself to the man she loved. If she did, what would be the outcome of it? How long would such an affection, at least on the man's part, last? Always those old set views of hers about life and morality rose up to haunt her indecision. Was she, after all, to recant, give up the fight, own herself beaten?

"Poor old Lexie," murmured Maggy, taking her hand after a long silence.

"Maggy,"—Alexandra held her eyes questioningly—"tell me honestly: do you in any way regret what you did? You know why I want to know."

Maggy looked within herself.

"No," she answered thoughtfully, "I don't. I do admit there's one thing that spoils it, makes it different to being married. You often wonder at night, or first thing in the morning, sometimes even in daytime, whether it's one day nearer the end or how far off the end is. I'm prepared for Fred to get tired of me one day, though I hope it won't come for years and years. But so long as he's straight over it I'll meet him half way. I'll go to my own funeral, and not sniffle. It wouldn't be reasonable to refuse to take the consequences. You've got to choose for yourself. I believe it's the only way for us girls on the stage. With most of us marriage is an accident. Only go into it with your eyes open. Leave out the fairy-tale notion that 'they lived happily ever afterwards,' or at least half of it. Thank goodness

for the 'happily,' and be satisfied with it."

"If only I could get right away," murmured Alexandra. "Here I feel hunted down. I sit and think and think and get weaker and weaker. And this room and the street simply shriek to me to leave them."

"I know all the symptoms, dear. They're new to you, but I've had them over and over again. The funny part is, Lexie, now it's come to the point I feel different about you. Although I was always telling you to climb over the garden wall to the little boy next door, now that you're half way up I'm afraid to give you a push. You might drop into something you didn't expect.... Oh, Lexie, pet, in my mind's eye I only see you dressed in white and orange blossoms. It's a damned shame you shouldn't have them.... And yet, if you don't, it may be worse later on, because you know as well as I do that you can't do any good on the stage all by yourself, and it's better to have the man you'd have married if you'd been given the chance than one you don't care a rap about except for what he can give you. It all sounds so muddled when I try and put things into words, but I know what I mean myself."

She stayed a little longer, but, after this, they both instinctively kept to the shallows of conversation, avoiding the depths. When she had gone, Alexandra, as Maggy had prophesied, tore up her letter. She took a fresh sheet and without hesitating wrote, "Just when you wish—Alexandra."

Then she went out and posted it, and, having betrayed herself, came home and wept bitterly.

XL

The crisis of surrender once passed Alexandra shed no more tears. Not that she ceased to feel. Indeed, her sensibilities were all on edge and remained so. But other feminine instincts soon asserted themselves. One was the blessed refuge of clothes. Tragedy notwithstanding, she must make herself presentable. She thought it would distract her. At first it did because she had to scheme to make the most of her dwindling store of wearing apparel. All that she was rich in were those outer garments bequeathed to her by Mrs. Lambert. For hours she adapted this and repaired that, improvising a pretense at a trousseau. That it was only pretense burnt itself into her brain. Every ribbon she threaded through slotted embroidery was not unlike a tug at her heart strings. All her things had been

marked with her name in full by the hands of the loved mother who had put every stitch into them. Well, there would be no change of name. She tried not to think what the dead mother, who had treasured her and taught her to pray, would feel if she could know of the step her only daughter was about to take. And though God now seemed to have turned His face from her, or she hers from God, she thanked Him for the dead's sake that avowal of it could not be made. Her mood was one of thankfulness for small mercies. She no longer rebelled against the laxity of stage morals. She was going to conform to them. The stage had deadened her susceptibilities to right and wrong. She was of it. She had elected to go the way it pointed. She had let down the drawbridge of her maidenhood for the besieging host to walk over as an invited guest.

In the midst of her needlework and her bitter thoughts there came the sound of feet mounting the stairs. Mrs. Bell opened the door and announced "The doctor to see you, Miss Hersey," in a tone that clearly proclaimed that his visit provided her with a touch of the same kind of excitement which she derived from a funeral. Alexandra was on her feet by this time, painfully conscious of the litter of garments that lay around her. Coloring, she gathered them all up in a heap, and turned to face her lover. He stood still, impatiently waiting for Mrs. Bell to depart, and only spoke when the sound of her descending footsteps had died away. Then he took Alexandra in his arms and kissed her.

"I got your note a quarter of an hour ago," he said. "I couldn't wait. I want to know about this wretched stage business. How soon can you get out of it?"

The question took her aback. She could not understand why he should wish her to leave the stage. She assumed that her connection with it had been the spur to his desire of her.

"But—" she faltered, "do you want me to leave it?"

"Don't *you* want to?"

"I—I don't think I ought to, now that I've made a start—"

"But, my dear child," he interrupted, "you won't want to work for your living when you're my wife!"

She almost doubted the evidence of her ears.

"What did you say?" she managed to ask.

"I said: When you're my wife. What else could you be? You didn't propose to be a sister to me, did you? I'm impatient, dear. In your letter you wrote: 'Just when you wish.' Didn't you mean it?"

She hid her burning face on his shoulder as she thought of what she had meant. And all the while his one idea had been marriage! His wife! Wife! Surely no word ever spoken could be so full of hallowed significance! ... What would he think of her if he knew what she had really meant? Ought she to tell him? Maidenly modesty counseled reserve, to take what the gods had given her. But

would that be honest? Maggy, in her position, would have blurted out the truth at once in her downright way: "Married and respectable! Oh, my dear, I didn't think you meant to include that in the program!" or some such easy phrase. But she was not Maggy, and words would not come. She heard Meer asking her how soon she could marry him; heard him outline a honeymoon in places that would cure her cough. And all the while she could say nothing. Meer, as happy as a schoolboy, was making an inspection of the room. Love lent a glamour to its cramped proportions and mean appurtenances. His eyes went to the small bed, resplendent now by reason of Maggy's eiderdown; an exasperating little bed nevertheless because it made nearly as many sleep-dispelling noises as the too obtrusive cistern.

"And that's where you sleep!" he said softly. The lacy pillow-case with her monogram on it, another of Maggy's gifts, lay uppermost. He bent and kissed it, then laughed diffidently and moved toward her. She shrank back a step, making a gesture with her hands that was almost supplicatory.

"There's something I must say. I owe it to you," she said with quick breaths. "You may not want to marry me when you know."

He saw that she was nerving herself to make some confession. Her connection with the stage and his own intimate knowledge of it, gained through professional attendance on many of its members, brought the disquieting thought that it might have to do with that ethical laxity that pervades its atmosphere. But none-the-less his arms went round her.

"I know the stage is a dashed hard place for a girl," he said gruffly. "So if it's anything that's finished and done with don't tell me."

She shook her head. "It's to do with me ... now."

"Not some other man?"

"No. Only you; you are the only one there ever has been, or ever will be."

"Then what in the world is wrong?"

Alexandra's words came tumbling out as though she feared her courage would evaporate before she could speak them.

"You said the stage was a hard place for girls. It is. It's all so wrong everywhere that the idea of a man proposing marriage is—is a surprise.... Oh, won't you understand?" She clasped her hands tensely. "You need not marry me—unless you want to, because I—didn't expect it."

She buried her head for very shame. Her last words were barely audible. She longed to look at him to learn what was in his face, but did not dare.

Meer did not leave her long in doubt.

"My dear," he said, moved to the very heart of him. "That is between you

and me—and God.”

XLI

After leaving Alexandra that morning Maggy had driven to Woolf's club. They had arranged to lunch together at some restaurant, but instead he bore her off to her flat, scarcely vouchsafing a word to her on the way. That he was in a towering rage she could see plainly enough. The reason for it she could not guess. He was apt to lose his temper. At such times she would tactfully wait until he had calmed down. Now, however, she was hungry and wanted her lunch, so she naturally asked for it.

“Where did you think of going for lunch?”

To her surprise he burst out violently: “Lunch be damned! You'll have lunch by yourself in future.”

“What's the matter? What have I done?” she asked, placably enough.

“I've found you out, that's all.”

Not another word could she extract from him until they were in the flat. Coaxing and gentleness only made him more morose. She began to feel afraid. What she could not see, because she did not know that the stage had lost quite a convincingly bombastic actor in Woolf, was that much of his anger was assumed; nor did she know that he was spoiling for a quarrel and that he had found a very good handle upon which to hang one. So blinded was she by her devotion that, except for the fact that since his return she had seen less of him than usual, she had not observed a certain weariness in his manner toward her. She did not at all know what he meant by saying he had found her out. Hoping to placate him by a show of affection she made an attempt to kiss him. But he repulsed her.

“I've had enough of that,” he scowled. “It's all shammed, and it comes easy to you, my girl. I was up here half-an-hour ago and I saw your dressing-case.”

“Well,” she rejoined, “you've seen it before, haven't you?”

“Not with a sheet of headed notepaper sticking out of it—Purton Towers, that swine Chalfont's place!”

Maggy's face cleared. She thought she knew now what the storm portended and how to weather it.

“Oh, is that all?” she said lightly. “I took it to wrap my toothbrush in, you goose! I was going to tell you about it all, but I forgot because I was so happy at

having you back.”

”A likely story! You expect me to believe you forgot to admit you’ve been carrying on with Chalfont!”

”Oh, Fred!” she cried, horrified at the allegation.

”Well, let’s have your expurgated version of it.”

”I went there for Christmas with Lexie. And the Honorable Mrs. Pardiston, his aunt, was there too. We went to church, and there was a Christmas tree and a children’s party. It was all quite proper and perfectly glorious. Lord Chalfont wouldn’t do anything that was underhand.”

”Of course you’re bound to say that for your own sake. Look here, Maggy, you needn’t tell me lies. I won’t swallow them. You know perfectly well that if I’d known he’d asked you down to his rotten place I’d have stopped your going.”

”I did think of that, Fred,” she admitted; ”but then I knew there was no harm in it, and if I hadn’t gone Lexie wouldn’t have been able to, either; and I wasn’t looking forward to spending Christmas alone here. No flesh and blood girl could resist a square invitation like that. Why didn’t you take me abroad with you if you couldn’t trust me? I haven’t asked you questions about where you’ve been or what you did while you were away. Besides, if it comes to that, husbands and wives often pay visits apart.”

”Do you consider yourself particularly qualified to give an opinion about the habits of married people?” he sneered.

”That’s a caddish thing to fling in my face,” she cried indignantly.

Woolf flinched a little under her flashing eyes.

”This quarrel’s getting vulgar,” he retorted uneasily.

”It’s of your making. Look me in the face, Fred, and you’ll see I couldn’t tell you a lie. Look at me, please.”

He did so reluctantly.

”On my solemnest word of honor, on my awful love for you,” she said with terrible earnestness, ”I swear to you, Fred, that never once have I been unfaithful to you, even in thought.”

”Never seen Chalfont in town, I suppose?” It was a chance shot, but Woolf saw that it had struck home. ”Oh, so you have!” he followed up quickly. ”Well—upon my word! That means, before I went away.”

”Yes. You shan’t say I’m deceiving you. I went to him to borrow some diamonds for Lexie.”

The astonishing avowal staggered him.

”That’s a pretty admission!” he laughed satirically. ”Gentlemen are not in the habit of lending girls diamonds for nothing!”

”Oh, what do you know what *gentlemen* do?” she retorted, losing control of her temper.

Had she deliberately tried to wound his self-esteem she could have chosen no better way. Inadvertently she had touched on the raw. Woolf would not have admitted it for the world, but deep down in his consciousness he knew that he was not a gentleman and had no pretensions to be called one. What galled him more than all was that Maggy, whose status would have been considered a grade lower than his own, must have detected the social difference between himself and a man like Chalfont. Accidentally she found the vulnerable chink in his armor of swagger and carefully acquired polish.

"That will do," he said, getting up and flushing darkly. "It's a bit too thick when a girl of your class sets up to criticise a man of mine. I'm not a gentleman? Very well, that ends it between you and me."

The stark finality of his words and manner made her tremble all over.

"You mean—Oh, my God, Fred, you can't mean you're done with me?"

"That's about it.... You've got nothing to complain of. You'll be better off with Chalfont."

She ran to him and held him.

"You can't believe there's anything like that," she cried piteously. "Why, he wouldn't look at me—not in that way. He knows I belong to you. If he thinks of me at all it's as he would of the little East-end children that people take down into the country for a day. He's a lord and I'm just common Maggy, and he condescended to be kind to me. Believe me, Fred, believe me, or I—I shall die. I can't live without you. You know I can't!"

Woolf did believe her. Although he hated Chalfont and his exclusiveness, which had once been the means of humbling him, he knew well enough that because of that very exclusiveness he would be punctilious in his attitude toward Maggy. He did not make the mistake of comparing Maggy's position with that of Mrs. Lambert. The latter was a woman of some social standing, separated from her husband. What did genuinely enrage Woolf was that Chalfont should be so contemptuous of his, Woolf's, relations with Maggy that he could be friendly with her in spite of them. It meant that he was ignored. It was inconceivable to him that Chalfont's attitude toward her was largely dictated by a touching respect for her personality, and pity that she should be associated with such a man as himself.

"Don't make a scene," was his unmoved rejoinder. "We can settle things quite quietly if you'll be sensible."

Maggy felt a fierce desire to scream and laugh and cry and so break her nightmare by noise. The cataclysm had come upon her so suddenly; the break seemed so imminent; her hold over Woolf so frail. She seemed to have held him by a thread and that thread had now snapped. Her sensation was one of absolute shipwreck. She experienced the very paralysis of actual drowning, the throbbing

of pulses in her head, the suffocation in her throat, the sense of being entirely submerged. And just as the drowning person is said to survey the past with startling clearness so she now had a rapid mental vista of her brief season of love and the desolation that would follow it if Woolf meant what he said.

"I'm *not* sensible," she pleaded. "You can't give me up for such a little thing as that. Oh, you're cruel, cruel!"

"If you're going to be hysterical I shan't stop."

His unrelenting manner had a steady effect on her. Tortured, but silent, she stared at him. Could this be the man whom she had been able to soften and cajole with a mere pose of her body; the man who had taken possession of her with such controlling ardor that she was oblivious of the very details of her capitulation; the man whom she had loved with such devastating vehemence? She could see by the utterly unmoved expression of his face that it was impossible to stir his pity. There might be a bare chance of exciting his passion, but a new-born delicacy of feeling in her prevented an appeal to that side of his nature. She made a strong effort to keep a hold on herself.

"I won't be hysterical," she said. "But—I can't understand why you're going on like this. You loved me before you went abroad. What has happened since?"

His eyes shifted from her face.

"What has happened since?" she repeated.

Woolf would not answer her. He got up and went to her little inlaid bureau, picked up a pen, squared his elbows and began writing something. Quivering with emotion, her breast heaving, her breath coming in gasping sobs, she stood where she was, incurious as to what he was doing. Presently he turned, and placed a piece of paper on the table.

"You can stay on here till the end of the quarter," he said. "After that I shall sublet it. And here"—he pushed the paper toward her—"is a little present for you."

She took a stumbling step toward him, arms outstretched, her poor face working.

"Fred! Don't go!" she shrieked.

But he had got to the door. He would go. Nothing she could say or do would stop him. She had just enough presence of mind left not to follow him. Even in that moment of distress she had the sublime unselfishness to refrain from making a scene beyond the privacy of the flat—on his account.

She tottered back to the table, clutching at it for support, stared down at the slip of paper he had left there—paper with a pretty lacy pattern, and read:

"*Pay to Miss Delamere ... or order Twenty-five pounds.*"

The words danced before her eyes like little black mocking devils.... *Twenty-five pounds!* The price which Woolf thought sufficient to buy her off!

Mad now, she scrawled her name on the back of the cheque, caught up

her hat and ran downstairs into the street. At the corner there generally stood a miserable woman with a baby, selling flowers. She was there now. Maggy was a regular customer of hers. She thrust the cheque upon her.

"It's signed on the back. Take it—oh, take it!" she said wildly, closed the dumfounded woman's fingers on the cheque, and sped on.

She went fast, walking aimlessly, conscious of nothing but the desire for movement. She wanted to lose herself, to forget herself. Of the things around her she saw nothing, heard nothing. Her processes of thought seemed to be exhausted. Her brain was a mere reservoir of utter hopelessness.

Yet, all the while, it was insensibly driving her in a given direction. In a dull way she realized this when she found herself in the street where Woolf lived. She had never been there since the day of that eventful lunch with him, seven months ago. The memory of it had a clarifying effect on her troubled mind. It calmed her frenzy. She asked herself what she meant to do, but could find no answer. She had not consciously intended going to his house. All motive for doing so was absent. Yet she could not pass it.

She rang the bell, and when the door was opened enquired for Woolf.

"Mr. Woolf is not in, miss," said the servant; "but Lady Susan is, if you would like to see her."

Maggy, still mentally benumbed, entered and followed her.

XLII

The room Maggy was shown into was occupied by a woman of about twenty-seven, busy at the telephone. She looked up casually, keeping the receiver at her ear.

"Take a pew," she said, and addressed herself to the instrument again, continuing a momentarily interrupted conversation.

It was spirited, and apparently had to do with a bookmaker, for it involved a "pony" on this and a "pony" on that and a "tenner both ways" on something else. Several sporting papers, one of them *The Jockey's Weekly* owned by Woolf, lay on the table at her elbow, with "Weatherby's" to keep them company.

Maggy did not sit down as invited. There was something about the woman at the telephone that gave her a mental stimulus, almost put her on the defensive. All her torpidity left her. The other went on speaking into the instrument, in-

terspersing her instructions with slang and stable-talk. She was untidily dressed in clothes of an accentuated sporting cut. Maggy, catching sight of herself in a mirror, twitched her hat straight, turned her back and powdered her nose. Then she stood still, waiting for eventualities.

With an "All right, see you on Thursday. Cheer-O," the woman rang off and swung round in her chair, bestowing on Maggy a hard-eyed scrutiny.

"Don't think I know you, do I?" she asked. "And that half-baked woman of mine didn't announce your name."

"Come to think of it I don't know yours," returned Maggy, instinctively full of a sense of antagonism. "She said something about Mr. Woolf being out and Lady Susan in."

"That's right. My name's Susan.... Have a drink?"

Maggy, flabbergasted, said, "No, thank you." She was puzzling her mind to account for this young woman's presence in Woolf's house when it suddenly occurred to her that there could only be one explanation of it. "You seem to be at home here," she remarked.

"That's rather cool," the other laughed. "I *am* at home. Who the deuce d'you think I am?"

"I haven't an idea. All I know is, you said your name was Susan, and the maid said you were a lady."

This rather wicked thrust only called forth another laugh, curiously unresentful.

"Oh, well, if you want the whole of it, I'm Lady Susan Woolf, sister of the Earl of Cantire." Without a trace of *mauvaise honte* the speaker went on, "You've heard of us, I should think: the hottest lot in the peerage."

Maggy's blank look showed that she was still at fault.

"But what relation—" she began.

"I'm Mr. Woolf's wife," cut in that lady. "Are you—the other woman?"

A quiver, not unlike that which vibrates through a ship when it runs on a sunken rock, convulsed Maggy. Like a stricken ship she seemed to hear the waters of desolation rushing through her vitals. But she kept her nerve. She would go down, if she had to, with band playing and flags flying, so to speak. Not to this woman, who was regarding her with lazy indifference, would she show the white feather, admit defeat or desertion. But Fred secretly married! ... He had lied to get away on his honeymoon ... and then come back to her after it! ... The rank infidelity of it ... to two women at once. All Maggy's womanhood was up in arms, outraged.

"You use rather odd language," she said with dreadful calm. "I think I must have come to the wrong house."

"Well, if you came to see Fred Woolf he lives here—when he's in." Again

the low, lazy laugh accompanied the rejoinder.

"Do I amuse you?" asked Maggy.

"No, not you personally. You look too dashed serious. Drawing room melodrama sort of expression. The situation's a bit quaint. Not many wives would take it calmly when their husband's pasts come knocking at their front door and walking in without being asked. *I don't care.* Daresay some of my old flames will flicker up now and then. I'm easy-going because it pays. But, honestly, I hope Fred hasn't left you on the mat?"

The question was quite devoid of offense.

"I said I must have come to the wrong house," reiterated Maggy. "I've only been in this street once before, and I wasn't sure of the number."

"This photograph tell you anything?" Lady Susan passed one across. "It's Fred's. I think I hear his gentle footfall in the hall, so you'll know how things are in a minute."

Maggy braced herself to look at the silver-framed portrait. She had a facsimile of it at the flat on the side-table by her bed, signed "Your warm friend." This one was similarly inscribed. Evidently Woolf followed a routine in such matters.

She heard his step outside and his voice calling "Susan, where are you?" but she did not look up when he opened the door. Only Lady Susan saw his startled glance of recognition. It confirmed what she had already guessed. She watched the two of them with the zest she would have given to a prize fight.

Maggy took her eyes from the photograph and set it down on the table so that from where he stood Woolf could see that it was his.

"No. I don't know that—gentleman," she said with calm incisiveness. And then, as if she had only just become aware of his presence, looked straight at him. The absence of all recognition in that look was quite perfectly done. With her eyes still on him she moved to the door and paused there.

And then she addressed him in the tone one adopts toward a person who exhibits a lack of ordinary manners.

"Will you please open the door?"

She passed out, band playing, flags flying.

XLIII

Somewhere about three o'clock Maggy got back to her flat. She was as calm

as death, and knew exactly what she had to do. In her nature there were few complexities: intuition guided her most of the time. Now she simply did not want to live. She was not only heart-broken because of Woolf's desertion but utterly crushed in spirit at having discovered that every foolish ideal with which she had endowed him had had no existence except in her imagination. That reflection made her despise herself as much as she despised him. If the breach could have occurred without such callous perfidy on his part, she might still have retained her self-respect. How much more preferable that would have been, even though it meant she might have gone on loving him.

How she had loved him! She had poured out to him all the passionate first-love of an exceedingly ardent nature; she had gloried in him, suffered for him. She had been content with an illicit position, even to the extent of refraining from urging him to legitimize their union when there was a reason for it—one that would have stirred the compassion of any other man. She had not thought herself good enough to be his wife, because, in effect if not in direct words, he had told her so. She saw him now as he really was, an unutterable cad, despicable, utterly snobbish. He had married with the sole object of associating himself with a titled family. That it was in bad odor made no difference to him. To hear the announcement or to read in print of "Mr. Woolf and the Lady Susan Woolf" had no doubt been the prevailing factor with him. It was clear enough to Maggy. He had not considered her a fit wife for himself because she was a chorus-girl, yet he had married a woman infinitely more common in the slangy sister of a decadent peer.

And all the time he had been contemplating this marriage she had made a jest of it, teasing him about a honeymoon abroad, unwittingly joking about the terrible truth! To think of it was gall and wormwood. She had trusted the man. Her own honesty had made her assume that he was incapable of deception. Conformity with the easy code of honor which men generally adhere to, even in an irregular union, was all she had expected. It had been denied her.

She was filled with a distaste for life. It could be so simply ended. There was a bottle of laudanum in the cupboard over her washstand. Without any hesitation she poured its contents into a tumbler and drank it off. It tasted so nasty that she ate a chocolate afterwards. Then she locked her door and lay down on her bed. Nothing in the world mattered now, not even Alexandra. She was too weary to think of her, even to analyze what she believed to be her own last sensations. Mentally exhausted she fell asleep.

She slept from half-past three until half-past nine, woke up suddenly and felt horribly ill. Her memory was quite clear. She remembered everything that had happened that day and what she had done, and wondered whether she was dead. A dreadful nausea and discomfort left her in doubt. Presently she decided

she was not dead but wished she were. She dragged herself to her feet and, obeying instinct, made herself an emetic. Though she did not wish to live she wanted to put an end to her appalling sensations. Later on, she drank two cups of strong black coffee, and soon after knew she was recovering. She must have taken either too little or too much of the horrid stuff.

She lay back, waiting for its nauseating effect to wear off. Half-an-hour passed inertly. Then abruptly her mind went to Alexandra, and she sat up. Lexie was on the verge of taking the reckless step which she, Maggy, had so long been advising, and Lexie must be stopped. She gave a hurried look at the clock. Nearly eleven! She might just catch her at the theater. She flew downstairs, found a taxi and drove there, just too late. Lexie had left a few minutes ago. On her way out again she ran up against the stage-manager.

"Hullo, Miss Delamere," he began; "what do you mean by turning up after the show? You seem quite indifferent to fines." Then he observed her livid face and the dark circles round her eyes. "Why, you look like death! What's the matter?"

"Nothing.... Let me go, Mr. Powell. I'll be all right soon. I want to find Miss Hersey."

She tore away, jumped into another cab and drove to Sidey Street.

Alexandra was luxuriating in the unwonted extravagance of a fire. That and the song she was humming were evidence of a new serenity of mind that had come to her. She was leisurely undressing, thinking of her impending marriage, when Maggy burst into the room, a Maggy whom she scarcely recognized. She had not been much concerned at her absence from the theater that night. She so often played truant.

Maggy reeled toward her. Alexandra caught her in her arms.

"Darling, what is it?" she cried in alarm.

Maggy clung to her like a terrified child.

"Lexie," she gasped, "am I too late? Am I too late? You haven't—Oh, my God! Lexie, it isn't worth it. Men—"

And then she fainted. Alexandra got her on to the bed, loosened her things, and called for Mrs. Bell. Together they managed to get a little brandy between her lips. The landlady dabbed her face with a wet towel; Alexandra held smelling salts to her nose, and presently she drew the reluctant breath of returning consciousness.

"Please go now," Alexandra requested Mrs. Bell. "I'll look after her. She shall stay with me to-night."

Mrs. Bell protested that she wanted to stop. Her *penchant* for any form of illness enchained her. She argued that she might be needed, and only reluctantly left the room when Maggy opened her eyes and murmured a request to be alone

with her friend. She lay with her face against Alexandra's shoulder, and then began to cry, weakly but uncontrollably.

"Lexie, I've been through Hell since I left you," she sobbed. "Suddenly I remembered you and rushed to the theater and then on here. You mustn't! Promise me you won't!"

"Never mind me, dear. Something has upset you. Won't you tell me? I shall understand better then."

"Fred's left me," said Maggy in a cracked voice. "He's married! ... Never trust a man, Lexie! Never trust a man! Keep straight if you starve for it. Promise me you won't go off like I did. I've come to *make* you promise."

Pity kept Alexandra silent. To make that promise would involve an avowal of her own happiness. How could she do that in face of the misery in which her poor friend was sunk?

Maggy clutched at her hand.

"A ring!" she cried, fearfully. "On that finger—!"

"Oh, hush, dear! I—I'm quite safe. Believe me, Maggy."

"But what does it mean? You wouldn't wear a ring on that finger if—"

"Maggy, darling, it means that I'm going to be married."

Maggy sat up the better to look at her. One glance at Alexandra's clear, illumined face told her that in some wondrously blest way her future had been happily arranged. All thought of her own disaster temporarily vanished in the joy she felt for the safety of her friend.

"That's all right," she said with a sigh of relief. "Lexie ... have you got anything to eat?"

XLIV

Although she had eaten nothing since breakfast that morning, a few biscuits and the remainder of Mrs. Bell's brandy sufficed Maggy.

"Now I'll go," she said, getting up. "I was in a fearful state about you, but now that everything has turned out so splendidly I feel quite all right again. Bless your sweet face, Lexie. I'd like to kiss you only I'm such a bad creature." Her lips trembled.

"Nonsense! Then I'll kiss you." Alexandra did so. "You're not going to-night, Maggy. You've got to stay here with me. We'll tuck in together. Here's a

nightie.”

”Tuck in—with you!” Maggy repeated. ”But, Lexie—I’m not—like you.”

”Nothing that’s happened can make any difference between us, Maggy. Try and forget you ever left me. Get undressed, dear.”

Very soon they were lying together in the little bed in the darkness. Alexandra did not talk. She wanted Maggy to get to sleep. It was so evident that she needed it. Half-an-hour passed in silence. A whisper from Maggy broke it.

”Asleep, Lexie?”

”No, dear.”

”Have you enough room?”

”Heaps.”

”May I have your hand to hold, Lexie? I feel so lonely.”

”You poor pet!” Alexandra’s hand sought hers.

”Lexie ... may I tell you things?”

”Yes, if it helps.”

”I don’t think anything ever will help. I’m done for, Lexie.”

”You won’t always feel like that,” was the consoling rejoinder.

Maggy sat up in bed.

”I tried to kill myself to-day,” she said abruptly. ”But the stuff only made me sick. That’s why I wasn’t at the theater. I should be dead by now if it had worked properly.”

”Maggy!”

”Yes, I did. How could I go on living? It’s not worth it. Alone again: a room like this without even you to make it bearable ... or men. I won’t do that. I went to the bad for love. I won’t do it out of habit.”

”Don’t be so despondent. You won’t have to live alone, dear. You shall leave the stage and be with me.”

”Is it likely?” asked Maggy, with a touch of her old independence. ”I wouldn’t tell anybody but you, but I gave Fred more than he gave me. It’s the meanness of it all that hurts so. There was the flat, I know, and the car; but they were only mine so long as he wanted me. And I paid for the meals I had in the place out of my salary. He gave me money for dresses because he liked me showy, but I went to sales and bought bargains, and what I saved that way I spent on him. And all the time I gave love, love, love! Oceans of it! Let me go on. Then, just before you went on tour I knew I was going to have a baby. Lexie, I longed for it! I think I’m the sort of woman that’s meant to have babies without much pain or trouble, just for the sheer joy of mothering them and kissing their dear, pink, crumple palms. But Fred was annoyed about it. I told him he could put me in a laborer’s cottage in the country and I’d live on ten shillings a week if only he would let me be a mother. Mrs. Lambert knew. I told her.... I had

to go to a dreadful place in Bayswater until—until it was over.... Fred arranged everything. He seemed to know all about it. And I wasn't even a mother, Lexie. I nearly died. I wish I had. And when I was back again with Fred, instead of hating him it somehow made me feel more than ever bound up with him in my heart, because of having gone through so much for him. He was quite kind to me afterwards, almost tender for him. He used to bring me flowers. I wonder why. He couldn't have loved me.... But now it's all over...."

Alexandra put her arms round the shaking girl.

"Lie still," she said.

She held Maggy to her as she would have held a child, and kissed her and cried over her in sheer pity, so stirred was she by the heartrending story. Presently Maggy lay very still, breathing evenly, asleep in Alexandra's arms. But Alexandra lay awake for a long time, trying to find a reason for the discrepancies of life. Why, for her, should there be provided a haven of safety, and for Maggy nothing but a desolate sea with breakers ahead?

Mutely, she prayed to the Providence that had tided her over so many storms to safeguard Maggy until she, too, made harbor in calm and peaceful waters. Praying, she fell asleep and did not stir when, some hours later, Maggy awoke and gently disengaged herself from the encircling arm.

Maggy sat up. By the light of the street lamps she could just make out Alexandra's peaceful face. She looked so happy and innocent. Maggy watched her for a long time very fondly. It was the only way in which she could bid her farewell, a long and final one. For Maggy intended making no mistake this time. She had dreamt of what she meant to do. The dream had been inspired by the noises in the street, and it still obsessed her. The thunder of heavy wheels resounded in her ears.... She was going to employ a monster crushing power to blot herself out.

Very quietly and silently she got out of bed and groped for her clothes. Dressed, she hovered for a moment over Alexandra's sleeping form, bent and touched her forehead with her lips ... and crept out in search of her Juggernaut car.

XLV

Maggy intended making for Covent Garden. She had once seen it in the early

hours after a fancy-dress ball to which Woolf had taken her, and she had marked the leviathan motor-lorries, freighted with perishable produce, converging on it. She meant to end her troubles under the wheels of one of these. The drug had failed her because of her ignorance of the fatal dose. This would be a sure and decisive way. In her dream it had seemed so feasible.

There would be something fitting in such an end. The very monstrousness of the ponderous vehicle was symbolical of the violence of the feeling that she had had for Woolf, the strength of passion that had drawn her to him. Her spirit had succumbed to strength and violence: strength and violence should annihilate her body.

The deserted streets were very silent. Maggy wandered along them, insensibly diverging from her route. She was thinking dully of a scene that long ago had made a dreadful impression on her mind. It had been a disconnected incident at the time: now its significance was almost personal. She had once seen a number of dogs pursuing a small mongrel, typical of the ownerless cur that gets its living in the streets. It was looking over its shoulder, heedless of the traffic. A motor-lorry came along at top speed. The mongrel made an unexpected dart across its track. There was an agonizing yelp, suddenly cut short; and though Maggy had quickly averted her eyes she had not been able to avoid witnessing the canine tragedy.

A shudder went through her at the recollection of it, a shudder of pity for the dog, not of apprehension for herself. She was too wretched to feel fear; but she was very weary and to some extent stupefied. When, therefore, she found herself in Portland Place instead of Covent Garden she was indifferent at having wandered in the wrong direction. She hardly met a soul. It was too late for night-prowlers and still too early for those who steal a march upon the day's work. An occasional policeman was all she came across. One flashed his lantern in her face, but satisfied by the serious look on it and her appearance generally, took no further notice of her.

It seemed to her that she had been walking interminably before the silence of the streets was broken by any sound of traffic. She had crossed the top of Regent Street, gone on due west by Cavendish Square and Wigmore Street, and was now in one of the turnings that give on Great Cumberland Place. At the corner a lighted doorway and an awning over the pavement told of a dance in progress. One or two carriages and a motor car were drawn up before the house. She did not look up as she passed it, but she slackened her pace when it was behind her, for she had heard the sound of a heavy vehicle. A slowly-moving van drawn by horses lumbered across the top of the turning. There surely she would find her *coup de grâce!*

She stood in Great Cumberland Place, listening. The faint rumble of the

morning traffic coming along Edgware and Bayswater Roads was audible now. Presently it was silenced by a nearer sound, the reverberation of machinery. It was coming at last. She kept on the edge of the pavement waiting and listening, trying to discern the advancing monster. The clank and rattle of it filled the wide street with stridulous echoes. She moved into the roadway, telling herself that she must make no mistake, give it no chance of avoiding her. She stood still, nerving herself for the moment of impact. It was very close now; its noise deafened her; a breath of hot metal filled her nostrils....

Now!

She stood poised, her body bent forward ready for the spring; and at that moment a heavy hand fell on her, jerked her roughly back and held her while the motor-lorry thundered by.

"Let me go!" she muttered thickly, pulling ineffectually against a uniformed arm.

"No, that I shan't," was the firm rejoinder. "Trying to do for yourself, eh?"

"I was crossing the road," she gasped, maddened by this second defeat.

The stars in their courses seemed to be fighting against her. Why should they prevent her taking her worthless life? And now, to add to her inflictions, she was in the grip of a policeman. She would be charged, cautioned, watched, so that another attempt would be well-nigh impossible. Besides, she wanted to make it now, while the madness was upon her.

"Crossing the road," she repeated. "Here comes a gentleman. He must have seen me. He'll believe me, if you won't."

She said it to gain time, in the hope that the policeman would relax his hold, so that she might run away. But though he took her suggestion, he gave her no chance of escaping.

"Beg pardon, sir, did you witness this young lady step off the pavement sudden-like in front of that there lorry?" he inquired.

The pedestrian, thus addressed, came to a stop. Maggy stared at him. The street lamp at the corner was behind him. But while she stared a motor car slipped past, the beam of its headlights full on his face, and she caught her breath as their eyes met—hers and Chalfont's. He was clearly too astonished to speak.

"He—the constable—thinks I was going to commit suicide, I believe," said Maggy, conjuring up a laugh that made Chalfont shiver. "It's fortunate you came along, Lord Chalfont. Please assure him I'm much too level-headed to do anything like that. I—I'm on my way home."

No part of her statement convinced him, but he took care that neither she nor the policeman should see that.

"So am I," he said in the most ordinary tone. "This lady is a friend of mine, constable. Here's my card. You've erred a little on the side of discretion, but that's

excusable considering how dark it is. I'll see her home myself. Good morning."

The policeman looked at the card and then touched his hat.

"Very well, m'lord. I apologize to the young lady for the mistake. At this hour of the night if we're not very careful—"

"That's all right," said Chalfont.

He took Maggy's arm, holding it almost as tightly as the policeman had done, and walked her on in the direction of the Marble Arch.

"Thank you," she said in a subdued tone when they had gone a dozen paces.

"Now I can manage to—to go on by myself."

"I don't think so," he rejoined sternly. "What are you doing, wandering about at this time of night?"

"I—I might as well ask you the same question."

"I can answer it. I have just left a friend's house—a late affair—fortunately for you."

"Why fortunately for me?" she asked, trying to assume an air of innocent resentment. "You're making too much fuss about a mistake in crossing the street."

He stopped, still holding her, compelling her to look at him.

"Maggy, are you going to tell me lies?"

"No," she choked, lowering her head.

"Then—" Chalfont did not proceed with what he was about to say. A taxi was passing and he hailed it. "I'll take you to your flat," he said.

"No, not there! I'm never going there again!" she cried, drawing back.

That she had some potent reason for that decision was evident to him. He did not ask her what it was. He guessed it.

"In that case," he said, "you must come to my house. I'm not going to leave you."

His determined tone put a stop to her spirit of rebelliousness. Passively she got into the cab and sat silent in its obscurity. When it stopped Chalfont opened his door with a latchkey. His servants had gone to bed, but in the room where Maggy had breakfasted with him there were sandwiches and consommé. He helped her to some of this, and she, beyond resistance now, took it. Then she shrank into the depths of the big chair which he had drawn up to the fire for her. She was unconscious of the tears of weakness that were welling from her eyes. Her hair had come down and was tumbled over her shoulders. Emotion had played havoc with her face.

Chalfont, watching her, was stirred by feelings that had their birth in pity. If they were gathering force, changing into others more personal, more tender, there was nothing of disloyalty to the memory of the dead woman on whom he had once lavished great affection.

"Maggy," he said quietly, "he has left you."

She lifted heavy eyes.

"How—how did you know?"

"I thought it would come."

A dry sob broke from her. Then she said: "He really was on his honeymoon.... Did you know?"

"No. But a few days ago I heard something.... I knew he was very thick with Cantire. I saw it coming."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"How could I?"

"No; I see.... I had to find out for myself.... Well, it's finished now." She stared blankly in front of her.

"Do you care so terribly?" he asked, after a pause.

She shook her head. "That's dead, I think. Everything's dead except myself, and I want to be. I can't stand it: the hardness—and the loneliness."

"I thought you were brave."

"Not when I don't want to be."

"I'm lonely too," he said; "but I haven't turned my back on life, partly because your advice helped me when I was feeling very down. Don't you think suicide is rather a craven thing?"

"Perhaps.... I shall have to go on living now, I suppose," she admitted dully.

"Oh, damn that policeman! I should have been pulp by this time! That's the second failure. I took laudanum this afternoon, and was only sick."

Chalfont went over to her chair, sat on its arm-rest and took one of her hands.

"Don't you think we have something in common?" he said, and waited for a reply that should warrant him speaking more definitely.

She rested her head against his shoulder like one who is spent.

"You make me feel peaceful," she murmured. "I wish you would give me some poison and let me die while you held me."

"You tragic person!" He tried to speak lightly. "You'll laugh at yourself, later on.... I want you to live."

"I'll live," she consented. "It's only a matter of breathing."

"You must promise me that—and something else."

"All right. What's the else?" Her voice was unutterably tired.

"Everything, in effect. I'm not good at explaining, but, first of all, I want you to understand that I honor you."

Maggy sat bolt upright. Two fierce spots of color came into her cheeks.

"Also," he continued, "that from the beginning, ever since I first met you, even when you made that admission about—him, I always thought of you apart from him, as Maggy—the nice girl."

"Maggy—the nice girl!" she echoed in wonder.

"When you came down to Purton Towers I seemed to see you as belonging there. Even after you had gone I felt that."

"But—how could I belong to Purton Towers?" she asked in a wondering voice.

"By marrying me," he said very deliberately.

She looked at him blankly for a few seconds.

"Marry you!" she faltered. "Me—marry you?"

"Suppose," he went on, "suppose I said I needed you? I do say it. I believe that we can bring something into each other's lives that at present is missing, and perhaps always has been. We should, at any rate, be very perfect friends. That would be something."

All her face lit up. Her lips quivered.

"What an idea! Me and you! At breakfast, at dinner—always.... Purton Towers, and me—your wife! Oh, you dear, I do believe you mean it! As if I could! But I tell you what: let me live in a little cottage in the grounds and sell eggs!"

"Oh, Maggy, you child!" he said tenderly.

Her eyes brimmed over. She took his hand and kissed it.

"Thank you so much," she said. "But it's—it's not in the picture. What sort of a wife should I make? No, it wouldn't do.... And there are other reasons."

"Ada Lambert?" he asked gently. "Is that one of them? I loved her as a young man loves the first good woman who comes into his life. I don't think I do her any disloyalty."

"No, it's not that. What difference could that make? If I could I would make you happy because you lost her. It's me. I don't come from a good man. I wouldn't let any one say that except myself. I loathe what he's done to me and the way he's treated me. But I've loved him. There's something I gave him I can never get back. It's strange: though I never want to hear of him or see him again, I don't want anything bad to happen to him. I should be sorry."

"I understand," nodded Chalfont. "But it need not stand between you and me, Maggy. We should start fair."

The ghost of a smile flickered on her lips.

"Think of the racket there would be in the papers about us! You would be ashamed. And I'm not worth it, really. 'Another peer weds actress. Romance of the stage. The third this season. Below we append other instances of brilliant marriages of stage beauties.' Think of it!"

"I fancy we could keep it out of the papers," he said. "We would be married in the country—in church."

"In church!" Her eyes grew misty. "You would—go to church with me? Oh, my dear, that would be more of my dream coming true, like the cedar trees and

the cows!”

“It’s going to come true,” declared Chalfont.

She held him away from her.

“Don’t tempt me. It’s not the title. That’s only—funny. Me, my lady! What tempts me is the thought of being with you in that place where my heart is.”

“My home?”

She nodded, appeared to be considering.

“There is this,” she said. “If I married you I would do my best to try and be a lady—not vulgar. I think, after a little, it would come easy.... You said we should be perfect friends; but suppose—suppose I couldn’t help loving you?”

“I was asking myself if that would come about—hoping it. In my case it is an eventuality not very remote.”

His very quietness impressed her. She knew he was not demonstrative, yet behind every word he spoke the intensity of his feelings was manifest to her. She had to fight hard to keep in check the ferment of emotion he had stirred in her. She picked up her hat from the chair where she had been sitting on it.

“It might have been more crushed,” she said quaintly, but with a meaning that had a hint of tragedy averted in it. She went to a mirror and began arranging her tumbled hair. “I must go back to Lexie. I stole out while she was asleep. Perhaps I shall get there before she wakes up.”

“I’ll take you,” he said. “Only—aren’t you going to give me an answer first, Maggy?”

She made a last desperate and unsuccessful effort at calmness.

“Yes—but I’m not worth having,” she sobbed and collapsed in a crumpled heap at his feet. “Don’t stop me!” she gasped, waving him away. “Let me—*burst!*”

And Chalfont stood where he was, waiting while her pent-up feelings exhausted themselves in a flood of choking tears, until she should be ready for him. Presently her sobs ceased. She struggled to her knees; her hands were clasped; her face, with a faint presage of happiness upon it, was turned to the window where the dawn of a new morning glimmered. Her lips moved. She was murmuring something beneath her breath. “What are you saying, dear?” he asked gently. “I—I think I’m saying my prayers,” she answered huskily.

There, on her knees, with her hair still hanging in disorder, the tears drying on her face, thanksgiving and humility in her heart, she repeated the words of her rhymed creed, with a reverence that surely gave it the consecration of a prayer.

“All’s well with the world, my friend,
 And there isn’t an ache that lasts;
 All troubles will have an end,
 And the rain and the bitter blasts.

There is sleep when the evil is done,
There's substance beneath the foam;
And the bully old yellow sun will shine
Till the cows come home!"

She held out her arms to Chalfont.

"Lift me up," she whispered.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HONEY-POT ***

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